fruitcake

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by pugfoot

Summary

An exploration of Jack and Robby's relationship from 2014, when Jack first arrives at The Pitt, to 2025 when the first season begins.

Notes

As always, this is unbeta'd, unproofed. Just a simple distraction from working on my next novel but also trying to moderate my Pitt-session that has cropped up. More detailed notes at the end, but please enjoy!

Chapter 1: 2014

2014

They'd given Robby an office when they'd moved him into a teaching position, a dingy room a few corridors back from the ER where he could settle in and do paperwork during his weekly catch-up shift. It was the only day he ever had off the floor and away from his student doctors and he loathed it, the red tape that came with the oversight of teaching a bunch of medical students and handling his residents so onerous that he sometimes thought it had been perfectly tailored to bring him misery.

It was already past seven, the last of his twelve hours having ticked away half an hour ago but his inability to leave work undone keeping him late as usual. He was signing off on a report regarding one of his interns when the door to his office opened and a dark-haired man entered, a camouflage backpack slung over one shoulder and a hoodie pulled over his scrubs.

They stared at each other for a moment, Robby not recognizing the stranger in the slightest; normally the only visitors he got back here were his students or occasionally a nurse asking him to mediate some kind of personal grievance. "Uh," Robby finally said. "Can I help you?"

"Gloria said this office wasn't in use at this time of night," the guy said, setting his backpack down on the ground next to the door and starting to shrug off his hoodie. "Are you gonna be done soon?"

"This is my office," Robby said, furrowing his brow. "There's a picture of my girlfriend on the desk."

"Yeah, and I've been looking at it every day for the past month," the guy said. "She's pretty."

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" Robby asked, piling his paperwork up so he could take it to the administrators on his way out. "You've been using my office for a month?"

"Give or take." He hung his hoodie up on a peg next to the door and stuck his hand out in Robby's direction. "I'm Jack Abbot. I've been an attending up in Labor and Delivery for about a year but only on nights. They're moving me down to the ER next week, so I've been getting all my educational ducks in a row during the transition. Needed a quiet spot, so… here I am."

It figured they'd give him an office only to have him sharing it with a stranger from upstairs. Robby took Jack's hand begrudgingly and shook it, taking the opportunity to study the newcomer. Handsome, in a kind of smug way, and a couple inches shorter than him; clearly ex-military, from his bag to his hoodie to his overall bearing, and Robby immediately disliked him. He'd worked with military guys in the past and they were hotshots, assholes, the kind of cocky that served no one but themselves and certainly didn't serve their patients.

"You're taking over for Page as the night attending?" Robby asked, but he didn't care what the answer was, hefting his paperwork under his arm and beginning to turn to leave. "Do you have emergency experience?"

"Before I came to Pittsburgh I was in Chicago at an ER there," Jack said. "And before that I was in Afghanistan. Any other vetting you want to do, Dr. Robinavitch, or can I get started on my paperwork now?"

"You know my name," Robby said, grabbing his backpack from one of the chairs in the small office and unzipping it so he could put his paperwork inside. "How did that come about?"

"You're pretty well liked in the hospital for some reason," Jack said. "A lot of the women who come up from the ER talk about the handsome doctor who helped them out when they got here, so I asked around and it was resoundingly agreed that it was you. Dr. Anderson's protege from New Orleans."

"You sound like you've got a chip on your shoulder," Robby said, hoisting his bag onto his back. "Is it because you never had a mentor or because you aren't handsome?"

Instead of looking offended, Jack's lip turned up in an obvious smirk. "I thought you'd be nicer for some reason," he said, clapping Robby on the bicep. "Seems like you're not a fan of me muscling in on your territory, but the way I see it you and me are colleagues now. You'll be seeing a lot of me when we trade off shifts, so maybe work on sharing your space better, yeah?"

Weirdly, Robby didn't get angry, a spark of some fierce competition firing up in his chest. He'd had so-called rivals before, guys in med school who got too big for their britches and doctors who struggled with Robby's single-minded focus on patient care. Finding himself face to face with a man who could give it as good as he could take it, who

clearly wasn't going to take Robby's sour grapes lying down… it was kind of nice. "I'll think about it," he said, shaking Jack's hand off before heading to administration.

He was just leaving the hospital, jacket pulled on against the impending winter cold and a hot shower calling his name, when he became abruptly aware that he had company in his walk. "Jeez, Dana, you can't sneak up on me like that. I'm getting old."

"Yeah, yeah," she said, pulling her cigarettes out of the pocket of her cardigan before looking up at him again, a knowing glint in her eye; Robby didn't have to ask to know what she wanted. "What did you think?"

"You knew he was being moved to the Pitt?"

"I might've heard something, sure," Dana said, using his height and broad chest to block the wind so it didn't blow out her lighter. "I mean, you must have figured out that Page needed replacing, right? She's retiring pretty soon here."

"I guess so? Once night shift and I hand off to each other I don't really think about them too much," She raised her eyebrows at him and he raised his back in return. "What? Do you know Bridget's whole life story?"

"Course I do," she said. "Maybe no one told you about Abbot because they figured you'd get jealous. Another hotshot doctor coming on the scene? Might ruffle your feathers."

"Oh, yes, I'm known for my jealous streak," Robby deadpanned as they reached Dana's car. It had become a routine, a way for him to make sure she got there safely after a patient had followed her out one night, and he liked the small moments he could get with Dana outside of the chaos. In all his career, he couldn't think of another charge nurse he trusted the way he did her. "Say hi to the family for me, will you?"

"Do the same to Janey and Jake," she said. "I'd hug you but a guy spit on me earlier and who knows what he got on my scrubs. Don't want you carrying home the new plague."

"So thoughtful," Robby said, laughing as he waited for her to get in the car and turn it on before heading on his way.

He didn't see Jack for another month, although he heard rumors of the new night attending. Robby wasn't sure if Jack had complained to Gloria about their introduction – unlikely, but possible – or if he was just caught up in taking over for Page, but they had never had to swap off, Adamson either handling Jack or Robby running into Page instead, and it wasn't until halfway through December that they came face to face again.

They'd had the first snow of the year and Robby had dressed accordingly, gloves and a beanie and a scarf that Janey had forced on him before he left the house, and he pulled a mask on as he made his way in through the waiting room to avoid picking up something from the droves of people who'd come in for little more than a cold. Annoyance prickled at the nape of his neck as he pulled his earbuds out, pocketing them and getting inundated with noise, the place as busy as ever. Robby wished sometimes that he could just tell people to leave, to go to an urgent care instead of coming here for something inconsequential and undoubtedly catching the flu in the process.

He greeted the triage nurses and pushed deeper into the department, finding Dana already at the desk chatting with Lena from nights. They both seemed kind of excited and when he approached they looked at him, Dana amused in a way he hadn't anticipated. "What's going on?"

"Sounds like there was a bit of excitement last night," Dana said, and Robby could tell from her tone that it was clearly the kind of excitement he wouldn't be impressed with. "One of the contractors working on the new wing fell and sliced his thigh open from knee to hip."

"Jesus," Robby said, frowning. "Is he okay?"

"Dr. Abbot saved his life," Lena said. "He keeps a bag in his locker filled with all these field techniques he had to use in the military and I guess it came in handy last night."

Robby felt his pulse quicken, certain he knew what was coming next. "Is Dr. Abbot around right now?"

"I think he's back by the lockers," Dana said, grinning. "Go easy on him, Robby. He saved the guy's life, after all."

Robby gave her a look and made his way through the ER, finding Jack where promised. At the sight of him irritation flared somewhere in Robby's chest, a reminder of how badly hotshot medicine grated on him. He had seen people die because his colleagues had been too

eager to show off some new trick or resorted to a risky procedure in favor of an established system. As soon as Lena had said that Jack had used non-hospital equipment, Robby knew exactly what she meant,

Jack was in the midst of changing his shoes and he glanced up when Robby approached, studying him briefly before seeming to realize that Robby wasn't just heading to his locker. "What's up?"

"Can I talk to you?" Robby asked, gesturing over his shoulder. "Staff bathroom is probably the most private spot."

"I'm not sure how I feel being asked to follow a colleague to the bathroom," Jack said, but Robby didn't smile at the joke and Jack seemed to realize he wasn't going to get away with deflection, following Robby into the men's room and looking around. "I kind of thought you were avoiding me after I stole your office."

"I wasn't avoiding you," Robby said. "When that guy fell last night, what did you do?"

Jack's expression immediately darkened and he looked Robby dead in the eyes, rocking back on one foot in a stance that Robby immediately recognized as defensive. "Are you joking?"

"No," Robby said. "Tell me. Walk me through it."

Jack stared at him before scoffing, shaking his head in apparent disbelief. "One of his coworkers came down to the ER, said he'd fallen and was bleeding. They had covered the cut with a rag but the blood wouldn't stop. I grabbed my bag and I headed up there. I applied a tourniquet and we got him back here to assess the situation better and figure out if he had a femoral bleed. Based on what I saw, I made the right decision."

"You were a hundred feet from a well-equipped ER," Robby said. "Not out in the middle of the desert. There was no need to take the risk you took by applying a tourniquet to the guy, especially not in an area that could cause so many complications. The upper thigh is such a delicate area! We need to make decisions that are the best for the patient, not decisions that just let you break out your glory days, right?"

"Oh my god," Jack said flatly, running a hand back through his dark hair. "I cannot believe I'm being lectured in a bathroom by a guy who isn't even my boss. We're both attendings, right?"

“That isn’t the point,” Robby said. “We’re not here to show off or to take unnecessary steps. It would have taken so little to get him back to the department and do things properly.” He glanced briefly at his watch, time ticking by to the point where he would need to get clocked in, and looked back at Jack. “If he’d died, do you know how quickly malpractice could be claimed?”

“He didn’t die,” Jack said, crossing his arms; Robby had to admit that there weren’t many people who could handle one of his lectures while holding his gaze so defiantly. “I really need you to take a step back and think about this. You and I are the same age, I think, although I will say the gray in your beard is making me think you might be getting up there. We’re the exact same seniority in this hospital, both doctors, just… I haven’t been here as long as you so you think you know more? What if I came to you like this?”

“I hope you would,” Robby said. “If I start doing stupid shit then you definitely should come and call me out. Do you not know how much of a risk you could have put him at? We could have had an amputation on our hands.”

Jack had been irritated during their conversation but for the first time he seemed genuinely angry, his dark eyes flashing with a barely suppressed rage. “God forbid we have to perform an amputation, right? It must have been so cruel of me to save his life when we might have had to cut his leg off as a result!” He grabbed his stethoscope off his neck and Robby got the sense he did it solely to keep his hands to himself and off of Robby. “You’re a real prick, you know that? It kind of seems like you’re the one with a chip on your shoulder. From now on, keep your fucking opinions to yourself, got it?”

He stormed out of the bathroom, the door slamming shut behind him, and Robby stood there for a moment, not necessarily stunned but confused as to what had pushed Jack over the edge into anger. He took a moment and then left the bathroom, checking the lockers and finding no sign of Jack before making his way back out to the nurse’s station. Dana was drinking out of her coffee mug and she looked at Robby as he approached. “What happened?”

“I told him that applying a tourniquet wasn’t worth the risk and that he can’t be making decisions like that,” Robby said. “I told him that with the department so close he shouldn’t be risking amputation like that, and– what?” Dana had grimaced and Robby, who’d been convinced he was in the right until that exact second, stepped closer. “Why are you making that face?”

“I mean, that was a pretty poor example unless you were actually trying to hurt him,” Dana said. “Harsh even by your standards, Robby.”

“What are you talking about?” Robby glanced towards the intake board, scanning it briefly and recognizing that he needed to get to work but consumed by curiosity now. “I was trying to make a point, not hurt the guy’s feelings. Why are you saying I made some pointed remark?”

Dana stared at him, brow furrowed, and Robby could see that she was trying to figure out if he really didn’t know or if he was playing dumb. She seemed to satisfy herself with whatever answer she came up with and sighed. “Put two and two together, Robinavitch. Why would a veteran be upset that you threw a possible amputation in his face?”

Robby’s heart stunk straight down into his stomach, a wild sort of guilt blossoming inside him until it seemed to fill every gap between his organs. “Oh my god.”

“His right leg,” she said by way of confirmation. “You really put your foot in it this time.”

Robby groaned, tilting his head back and taking a moment to breathe in through his nose. “I’m sure Gloria will bring it up soon enough,” he finally said. “Nothing I can do about it until tonight regardless. Fuck, though… I can be such an ass.”

“Aw, you’re good,” Dana said, knocking her elbow against his. “So territorial, though. Maybe work on that?”

“You got a minute?”

Robby looked up from the Snickers he was inhaling, wondering if he looked as tired as he’d felt. It had been a busy morning, but he knew he was distracted despite his best attempts to concentrate on the tasks at hand; it hadn’t affected his work yet, but as the guilt from that morning’s argument didn’t let up it was difficult to think about much else in between patients.

He wasn’t surprised to see Adamson, the pair of them conditioned to take their breaks around the same time, and he also wasn’t particularly surprised that his mentor wanted to speak with him. There was no gossip machine like a hospital, and while Robby knew Dana wouldn’t leak the actual details of their conversation he also

knew that enough people had seen him and Jack together to figure out they'd had an argument of some kind. The word had obviously gotten back to Adamson.

"Sure, where?"

Adamson nodded towards an empty patient bay, the two of them stepping inside and Adamson pulling the curtain closed behind them. He looked up at Robby, an eyebrow arched in curiosity. "I wonder if you can tell me what happened this morning."

Robby sighed, rubbing at his forehead vigorously before he started to speak. "I fucked up with Dr. Abbot," he said, launching into a recounting of what had happened, albeit in more detail than he had with Dana; with Adamson, he could afford to tell the entire story. When he finished, he looked at his mentor, his guilt apparent. "I just wanted him to understand that he shouldn't be taking those risks, not insult him like that. I can't help but feel like I've really put my foot in it this time."

"You have, kind of," Adamson said, almost thoughtful as he said it. "But I don't think you have to worry about any permanent damage yet. You definitely started off badly with Dr. Abbot, but I wonder… do you think that you have some capacity at the end of your shift to have a conversation with him? Just a conversation."

"About what?" Robby asked, although he thought he could see what Adamson wanted. "I don't want to end up insulting him again."

Adamson shrugged his shoulders. "About anything you want. You can apologize, you can get to know him, anything. I just think that you tend to look at men your age in this field as fundamentally in medicine for the wrong reasons, and it affects the way you approach them." He grinned, patting Robby on the arm. "I've tried my best to get rid of most of your biases, but this is one you really have to work on yourself."

"Got it," Robby said, considering Adamson's words carefully. He knew well that Adamson saw Robby for who he was in his entirety, that he'd taken who he was when he got to Pittsburgh and crafted him into the confident doctor he was now instead of the misery that could have engulfed him when he'd left New Orleans, and he knew that as a result Adamson was right. "Maybe I can claw it back."

"I think you can," Adamson said. "You can be charming when you aren't trying to tell people off."

“Shut up,” Robby grumbled affectionately. “I just hold other people to the same standards I want to be held to. If I did something dangerous because I was in fight or flight mode instead of thinking things through, I’d want to know. I’d want him to tell me.”

“Talk to him, then,” Adamson said. “It’s okay to have a rival, Robby, but that rival shouldn’t hate you. Now come on. The day’s not even half done."

Waylaying Jack turned out to be simple, the man coming into the department as Robby was debriefing with Adamson at the nurse’s station. To Robby’s surprise, Jack didn’t ignore him, meeting Robby’s eyes with a neutrality Robby didn’t expect, and without hesitating he cut around the edge of the station and stood in front of Jack. “Do you have a minute?”

“You gonna yell at me in the bathroom again?”

“No, I’m gonna yell at you on the roof,” Robby said, Jack letting out a huffing laugh. “Come on, I just want a chance to, uh, clear the air.”

“Sounds good,” Jack said, hefting his bag over his shoulder and following Robby to the elevator. They stayed silent on the way up, but Robby was surprised to find that it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence, more like both of them had calmed down since that morning’s blowout and had come to the same conclusion during the course of the day.

The roof was freezing cold but it was welcome after the heat of the hospital and Robby was pleased to see a light dusting of snow, the first of the year. He crunched over to the railing and leaned against it, looking out over the city, a muffled quiet over everything thanks to the fat flakes of snow drifting down from the sky. “I’m really sorry,” he finally said, staring down at the sidewalk far below. “Not for bringing my concerns to you but for the way I spoke and the lack of trust I had in you. It was shitty and unprofessional and it won’t happen again, I can at least tell you that much.”

“That chip on your shoulder is visible from outer space,” Jack said, coming to rest alongside Robby and looking out at the city as well. “How did you know this is where I come to unwind after shifts?”

“I didn’t,” Robby said. “But it’s where I come when I need a breather.” He frowned, lacing his fingers together and avoiding looking at Jack. “I know I have a bias when it comes to other guys my age. I know I

tend to look at any doctor who came up at the same time as me as fundamentally lacking in the empathy I expect but I jumped on you without giving you the benefit of the doubt."

"This morning, I was just so stunned that you came after me that way," Jack said. "But I went home, I talked to my wife, and she said that one, she didn't think you knew about my leg, and two, it was clear you had some misgivings about reckless doctors. I figured there was no harm in hearing you out. But I wanna know *why*, man. Why did you immediately assume that I was showboating and not doing my best to help?"

Robby leaned over, resting his forehead against his clasped hands and letting out a breath. "I started my residency right before 9/11. I know that's such a cop-out answer, but it's true. I was in New Orleans for all four years, and right at the end of my time, Katrina happened. It was a fucking nightmare. I got sent to the Superdome to try and help out and was there when the evacuations started. The amount of guys our age I saw running from the hardships there, trying to abandon the people they'd sworn to help… It fucked me up. When the hurricane actually hit and we realized how skeletal our hospitals were, it upset me. I had worked with these guys for years and a good chunk of them were treating the hurricane like an inconvenience or something that we shouldn't have to help with."

He glanced at Jack, who was looking out at the city and listening intently, and felt a weird surge of relief. "I always hated the guys in med school who were only becoming doctors for the prestige. I grew up poor, grew up scrabbling for every hold I could get, and to come into a situation where I was on the same level as those rich kids only for them to look at those people in New Orleans and decide that they didn't deserve a fair level of treatment during Katrina made me so bitter. It's been a few years since I came back to Pittsburgh and that bitterness is still working out of my system, I guess."

"I don't want you to dislike me," Jack said. "I came from the same kind of situation as you, I think. Middle class, joined up after 9/11, did all my medical training on the fly. I've only been in proper hospitals for a couple years now after my leg, and I didn't ever think of what I did today as any particular risk since it's something I did all the time in the field. The medicine I've practiced is emergency medicine in the most primal form, but I get where you're coming from."

He turned to look at Robby, reaching out and gripping his wrist. "I'm

glad you told me and I'm glad I listened to my wife." He grinned and put on what Robby immediately recognized as a terrible Humphrey Bogart impression. "Robby, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"Oh my god," Robby said, shaking free of Jack's grasp and laughing despite himself. "I'm glad all it took was dumping my tragic backstory on you for you to forgive me."

"Hey, we've all got tragic backstories," Jack said. He straightened up, peering up at the sky, and Robby looked at him in profile, surprised at the first thought that struck him: the guy was handsome. Silhouetted against the lights of the roof and in the glow of the snow, any smug self-assuredness had been washed away, replaced by a strange affection. Robby was a man whose friends were few and far between, his life absorbed by Janey, Jake, and work, and he considered for a moment that perhaps Jack was right in his earnest quoting of *Casablanca*.

Maybe they were meant to be friends after all.

Chapter 2: 2015

Chapter Notes

It's been so long since I've done a multi-chapter fic that I don't even know if people do author notes on all of the chapters anymore. Regardless -- not proofread, not beta'd. We're still in the set-up phase but I'm really hoping this will just be little vignettes of the development of their relationship! Enjoy!

2015

“I’m so sorry about this, Robby,” Janey said, Jake settled at the staff room table with his 3DS already fired up and his focus entirely on the device. “Really, I wouldn’t have brought him here if it hadn’t been such short notice.”

“It’s really not a big deal,” Robby said, shrugging one shoulder and looking past his girlfriend at Jake. “You can hang out here for an hour, right, kid?” Jake gave him a thumbs up and Robby grinned at Janey. “Who said raising children was hard?”

“Oh, you’re being a funny guy today,” Janey said, laughing. She kissed him on the corner of the mouth before checking her watch and pulling a face. “Okay, I’m off. I’ll see you in the morning. He should be good to eat dinner when you get off work.”

“Got it,” Robby said, following her out into the main part of the department. The ER was bustling as usual but Robby walked her to the exit nonetheless, stepping outside into the cool fall air and turning to look down at her. “I’d give you a proper kiss, but–”

“I know, I know, germs,” Janey said, smiling. “I don’t know what we’d do without you, Robby. Really, you’re such a good role model for him.”

Robby could feel his ears burn at the compliment and rubbed at the back of his neck, trying to brush off the praise. “Ah, well, it’s easy when he’s such a good kid,” he said, lifting his gaze from her and towards the parking lot. He was startled to see Jack approaching, and his surprise must have shown on his face because Janey turned around to look as well.

“Dr. Abbot!” she said brightly, and Jack smiled at her.

“Hey, Janey. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I was just dropping Jake off for a bit,” she said, and then seemed to remember she was in a rush. “Shoot, I really do have to go. I’ll talk to you later!” She squeezed Robby’s hand in goodbye and then raced off, Robby and Jack watching her go. Once she was in her car, Jack turned back to Robby, looking up at him.

“Jake’s here?”

“Yeah,” Robby said, falling into step with Jack as they headed back into the ER. “Janey got called in so she dropped him off until my shift is done. Dana promised that she’d make sure he didn’t leave the staff room, so…”

“Tonight’s my paperwork shift, so he can hang out with me until you’re done,” Jack offered. “Better than being in the staff room.”

Robby considered this briefly and then nodded, easily convinced. He and Jack had started off on the wrong foot but the last year had tempered those feelings, Robby finding more and more that Jack was capable and willing to get his hands dirty in the worst of situations. They’d recently had overlap on a car crash victim and Jack had been calm, measured, and cracking jokes with the guy the entire time they’d been working on him.

Robby rarely admitted that he was wrong about people, but he’d been wrong about Jack. “Yeah, sure,” he said, clapping Jack on the shoulder, his hand lingering there briefly before he realized he’d been touching the other man for a little too long and letting go. “I’ll come get him when I’m done.”

“Sounds good,” Jack said, splitting off from Robby and heading for the staff room.

Robby walked over to the nurse’s station, peering up at the board and scanning the bays before realizing Dana was watching him. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking that you’re good with kids,” Dana said, shrugging one shoulder. “You ever thought of having some of your own?”

“Not really,” Robby said. “I mean, Jake is my own as far as I’m concerned. And I don’t think Janey is in a rush to have another.” He tapped the desk, looking at her. “I’ve got Chest Pain in 14, okay? Hopefully we can wrap it up quick.”

Somehow Robby was finished only half an hour later than he thought he would be, grabbing his things and making his way back to the office he shared with Jack. What had been a bone of contention was now a shared space, a picture of Riley, Jack’s wife, posted on the desk alongside the one Robby had of Janey and Jake, a cane constantly hung over the edge of the desk in case Jack decided he wanted to take

his prosthetic off while he was doing his admin work. It had been weird to begin with but Robby had come to terms with his territoriality, had realized it really wasn't a big idea.

Jake was sitting on the floor in front of the bookshelf when Robby entered except instead of playing on his DS he was filling out a blank patient form. "Uh, what are you doing there?" Robby asked, crouching down to look at the page. Jake was a pretty decent reader even if his spelling could leave something to be desired, and it was clear he was taking his job very seriously, the first half of the form filled out in his best handwriting. "Oh, wow."

"He got tired of Mario," Jack said, not looking up. "So I asked if he wanted to help me fill out some paperwork. I told him it was super important to memorize his name and his address and any allergies he has, so he's been working on getting that paperwork filled out for me."

Robby grinned, putting a hand on Jake's head and ruffling the curls. "You did a really good job for Dr. Abbot," he said. "Maybe you'll even be a doctor someday."

"Dr. Abbot showed me his leg," Jake said matter-of-factly; at seven, he was hitting an age that was both precocious and a little macabre, and Robby had a feeling that Jack hadn't so much shown his leg as been asked several times about it after Jake had gotten a glimpse of the prosthetic. "Have you seen it?"

"I have," Robby said. "Now that he's shown it to you, you know it's rude to ask anyone else about it, right? If you've got any questions if you see someone else with a different arm or leg like that, you can ask Dr. Abbot."

"I understand," Jake said, hopping to his feet and gathering up his things before handing the form over to Jack. "I only got it half done."

"That's fine," Jack said, grinning. "This is a huge help, honestly."

Jake beamed back at him, pleased with his work, and Robby got up from where he was squatting, looking over at his colleague. "I appreciate it, man."

"It's not a big deal," Jack said. "I did want to ask you something, though."

"Oh, sure," Robby said. "Jake, can you wait outside for a second?"

Jake huffed but did as he was told; as soon as the door snicked shut Robby raised his eyebrows. “What’s up?”

“It’s nothing bad,” Jack said. “I just didn’t want to ask in front of Jake in case you said no. I was supposed to have one of the guys from my unit in town this weekend so I bought tickets to see the Penguins, but he can’t come now. You’re off on Saturday, right?”

“Yeah,” Robby said, surprised. He couldn’t remember the last time a guy his own age had asked him to hang out, and he certainly couldn’t remember the last time he was at a hockey game. “You seriously want me to go?”

“Well, Riley can’t come and I thought it might be fun for Jake. Has he ever been to a hockey game?”

Robby shook his head, considering. “No, I don’t think Janey is a big hockey fan. I think he’d get a kick out of it, though. You sure you want to spend all that time with me?”

Jack grinned, dark eyes fixed on Robby. “I think I can survive a couple hours of hockey. Meet me here on Saturday at like five or so and we can carpool, okay? I’ll even bring a jersey for the kid.”

“Wow, okay,” Robby said, embarrassed by how excited he was despite himself. “I’ll see you then, I guess.”

“I think it’ll be fun,” Jack said, and Robby could see the metaphorical olive branch he was extending almost as clearly as though it was real. “See you on Saturday, Robby.”

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“Are hockey games fun?” Jake asked, Robby glancing in the rearview mirror of the car to meet his eyes. “Are they like football?”

“Kind of,” Robby said. He would never admit it, but at the moment his nerves were kind of high-strung; it had been years since he’d just hung out with someone outside of work, and while Jake was definitely a good buffer to have Robby was worried that he had forgotten how to be around adults on a personal level. Even Janey had admitted that when they’d first started dating he’d come off as clipped, as though he was trying to get to the core of the conversation without any of the fluff that usually came along with it. “I haven’t been to one since before I became a doctor.”

“We’re going with your work friend, right? I like Dr. Abbot.”

“I’m glad,” Robby said. “I’m pretty sure everyone I work with likes you. Maybe you’re a good kid after all.” He laughed as Jake stuck his tongue out, reaching back to grip Jake’s knee and squeeze it gently. Honestly, he’d been hesitant when he’d started dating Janey, worried he wouldn’t know how to handle having a kid around, but he didn’t think he could love Jake more even if he’d been his biological kid.

He turned into the hospital parking lot and spotted Jack, the man chatting with a nurse that Robby faintly recognized from the labor and delivery floor. As poorly as they’d gotten started, it had become clear to Robby that people liked Jack, something about him inspiring friendship; Robby was too myopic to see it, but it was much the way his colleagues saw him as well.

He parked alongside Jack’s car and rolled down the window, Jack excusing himself from the nurse and leaning in. “You want to drive?” Jack asked, and Robby shrugged. “Probably easier. Let me grab the jerseys.”

Jack disappeared briefly into the backseat of his car before returning, climbing into the passenger seat of Robby’s vehicle and turning around in his seat to look at Jake. “Hey, kid! Huh, that’s weird. I think you got taller since Wednesday.”

“Really?” Jake asked, excited.

“Really,” Jack said, holding out a jersey to him. “I hope this still fits you. You gotta wear it over your clothes so everyone knows you want the Penguins to win. Me and Robby are gonna wear them, too.”

“Okay!” Jake pulled the jersey on over his head and Robby shook his head affectionately before putting the car back in drive and heading out of the parking lot. “Do you watch a lot of hockey, Dr. Abbot?”

“You can call me Jack,” Jack said. “We’re not at the hospital, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess so.”

Jack grinned at Robby, who raised his eyebrows in return although he was unable to keep the hint of a smile off his face. “I brought you a jersey, too, don’t worry.”

“Oh, trust me, I wasn’t worried. Why do you have so many?”

“I’m a hockey fiend,” Jack said. “Yours is technically for away games which is embarrassing for you, but it was the only jersey I had leftover.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m really embarrassed,” Robby said, chuckling. “Janey says thank you, by the way. She had to work today so she was worried about Jake being bored.”

“Weird, Riley said thank you, too, but I think she just wanted me out of the house,” Jack said, “I know she has to be relieved that I’m not dragging her to another Penguins game so I can gush over Sidney Crosby.”

“Who’s Sidney Crosby?” Jake asked, leaning forward in the backseat so he could look at Jack. “Should I know him?”

“You’ll know him by the time the game is done tonight,” Jack said, grinning. “You guys are in for a hell of a crash course in hockey.”

Robby glanced at Jack, smiling despite himself. “Who knew you were such a sports guy?”

“I contain multitudes,” Jack said, faking a bow. “Never judge a book by its cover, right?”

“I guess so,” Robby said. “We’re about fifteen minutes away, so maybe start filling us in on the basics. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a hockey game.”

***

“Well, what do you think?” Jack asked, raising his voice a little as he returned from concessions and slid into the seat next to Robby. “Pretty exciting, huh?”

“Did you bring me nachos?” Jake peeked out from his seat next to Robby, his jersey covered up by Robby’s hoodie after he complained about being cold halfway through the second period. “Yes!”

“I guess that’s exciting enough,” Jack said, handing the tray of nachos over to Jake before handing Robby a Diet Coke and sipping his own beer. “I mean, to be fair, I’m pretty sure nachos were my favorite part of hockey games as a kid, too.”

“Don’t worry, he’s definitely having fun,” Robby said, settling back in his seat. He had to admit that he was having fun, too, unable to

remember the last time he'd just sat and watched any kind of sports game without allowing himself to be distracted by endlessly trying to catch up on work or reading up on what his residents were learning. "These are pretty good seats, by the way."

"Hey, only the best," Jack said, wiggling his eyebrows at Robby, who huffed a laugh and looked back at the ice. "I gotta say, I really didn't know if we were at the point where we could hang out outside of work. I kind of thought we'd argue the whole time."

"I kind of thought the same thing," Robby admitted. "After how I started things with you… I know I can be an asshole."

"No," Jack said, shaking his head. "No, that's not true. You're not an asshole. I definitely thought you were, but working with you and hearing how people talk about you makes it way more clear exactly what kind of guy you are. You just have high standards for the people you work with, and why shouldn't you? Shitty doctors can cause a lot more issues than they're worth." Jack looked at Jake, who was digging into his nachos, and then at Robby. "Sorry, I didn't mean to swear in front of him."

"He's heard worse, I think," Robby said. "I'm glad the impression I made wasn't permanent."

"It definitely could have been, but apologizing went a long way, and… well, seeing you work has been helpful, too. I've gotten a way better idea of how you operate."

"Oh, yeah? How do I operate?"

Jack looked at him and Robby returned his gaze, something sparking in his chest that was both unfamiliar and slightly strange. It was a bizarre sensation and one that he had been noticing more and more of late, like when Jack looked at him as though he was looking through him and seeing whatever thoughts were in Robby's head. "You just want people to care the way you do," he said finally. "And when they don't meet the standards you have for yourself, you don't let them off the hook. I was pissed at first because I thought it was some kind of territorial thing, but after you apologized and I talked to Adamson and Page it made me realize that you were just expecting me to do the same sort of thing you would do."

"I know I can be intense," Robby said. "But I swear it's just because I want to make sure everyone is doing the best they can. Adamson did the same thing to me when I got to the Pitt because I was still clinging

to some of the biases and shit that I had taken out of New Orleans. I was also…" He paused, looking down on the ice as the third period puck drop happened. Jake hollered as the action got underway again and Robby grinned, ruffling the boy's curls; when he'd first gotten involved with Janey, he hadn't anticipated coming to love her son as much as he did.

"Was also?" Jack prompted, echoing the last of Robby's words, and Robby laughed.

"I was also letting my emotional attachment to patients override my ability to be a good doctor. I thought spending fifteen minutes getting their entire life story made me a better doctor, but one morning I was sitting with a lady who'd fallen at home. She was telling me everything, how she'd scraped her knee when she was seven, how her husband had died, just everything, and while I was sitting there thinking I was doing such a great job there was a guy dying in the waiting room because he wasn't seen in time. Just keeled right over from a heart attack after coming in for an upset stomach."

"You couldn't have known that there was a man dying," Jack said, the empathy in his words slightly undercut by an air horn blasting as the Penguins scored, the crowd erupting in yells as a result. Jack laughed, covering his face briefly before he looked at Robby, the corners of his eyes crinkling endearingly. "Maybe this isn't the most appropriate spot for this conversation."

"No, I think it's better than having some serious talk on the roof," Robby said, laughing as well despite himself. "And I know that there wasn't anything I could have done for that guy, but I just kept thinking that in the fifteen minutes I took getting background from that woman, I could have gotten background from three or four patients instead. It was a real eye-opener. I didn't want to lose my empathy but I also didn't want to make it so patients couldn't be seen."

"That makes sense," Jack said, "I think for me… sometimes I feel like I'm still stuck in this fight-or-flight mode. Like if I don't act immediately, it's the worst case scenario and my patient won't make it. It's getting easier to kind of quiet that voice, but I still find that there are times where I think if I don't do this battlefield trick right then and there, I'm going to let someone die. I think that knowing our flaws is important, though." Jack reached over and gripped the back of Robby's neck, a brief moment of physical affection that left Robby strangely touched. "I guess this is all to say that I don't want to fight

you in the parking lot anymore."

"Oh, good," Robby said, laughing. "I think Dana was worried about that for a while."

"Would you guys actually fight?" Jake asked, raising his eyebrows. "I didn't think doctors were allowed to do that."

"No one should be fighting," Robby said; almost immediately, there were shouts from the ice and a chorus of jeers around them, the players having broken out into a brawl. "Uh, I guess unless you're a hockey player. That's okay."

***

Jake was asleep by the time they reached the parking lot of the hospital, slumped over in the backseat with his jersey still on. The game had ended with the Penguins winning and Jake had expressed several times how much fun he'd had, so much so that Robby and Jack had made tentative plans to take him to a couple more games over the course of the season. Driving back to the hospital was actually kind of fun, the conversation easy, and when they reached Jack's car the man didn't get out right away, looking at Robby across the center console. "I'm glad you said yes," he said finally. "To hanging out."

"It's been a long time since I did anything like this," Robby said. "The most I usually get out is going to dinner with Janey and Jake."

"He's a really good kid," Jack said. "You can tell he loves you, too."

"Have you thought about having kids?"

"Me and Riley talked about it when we were younger," Jack said. "After my second tour, though, we figured it wasn't going to happen." Jack grinned at him, hand on the door handle. "Now I can live vicariously through you." He glanced back at Jake, who was still asleep, and his face softened a bit. "He can keep the jersey, by the way. I picked it up for him earlier."

"I thought you already had it!" Robby said, surprised, and Jack shrugged one shoulder before getting out of the car.

"I wanted him to remember his first game," he said, waving. "And I wanted you to remember the first time we hung out, too. See ya, Robby."

He closed the door and Robby watched until Jack made it into his car before pulling out of the parking lot, unable to understand why such a simple statement had made the blood rush to his head.

Chapter 3: 2016

Chapter Summary

Jack and Robby get a little Christmas shopping done.

Chapter Notes

Unbeta'd/unproofread as usual!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2016

For a man who didn't celebrate Christmas, Robby sure had spent an inordinate amount of time at the mall on his day off looking for Christmas gifts. Jake was easy, honestly. He and Janey had discussed it and they'd decided to get him a Playstation, albeit with some strict rules regarding anything online. The kid was easy to shop for and always so grateful that Robby honestly thought he could get Jake a rock off the side of the road and still be thanked profusely.

It was Janey who was difficult, although Robby knew that was on him more than it was on her. They'd been together for over six years now, since Jake had been a tiny toddler with the fattest cheeks Robby had ever seen and since Robby had still been relatively fresh to being a doctor with his own autonomy. He knew he'd changed over the years, become more harried, more stressed out. Anxiety, which had been an issue since he'd been a kid, had crept up on him like a blanket, smothering and dark, and there were nights where he would sit down the street from Janey's house and cry in his car before finally coming home.

Amid this all there was a clawing sense that he didn't love her romantically anymore. That he loved her was a given; Janey and Jake had been part of his life for so long now that he couldn't imagine not having them around. But he didn't feel *in love* anymore, not how he had at the beginning. He was getting the sense that Janey, too, was feeling less lovey dovey with him as of late. Robby felt like this was his fault, though. He couldn't be upset with her for pulling away when he had been the first to do the same.

And now here he was, in one of Pittsburgh's busiest malls on one of the busiest weekends of the year, feeling simultaneously overwhelmed and on the cusp of dissociating. There was no quiet spot to be found but Robby had still tried, settling on a bench in the middle of the mall with the things he'd picked up so far settled between his feet. He had

been pretty successful in shopping for Jake, but Janey's presents so far were bare bones. A few books she had mentioned, a pair of gold earrings that she had her eye on, but nothing that would really knock her off her feet.

Worst of all, he was tired.

He'd worked Thanksgiving and Black Friday in exchange for having Christmas off, but it had really just left him exhausted. He found he wasn't bouncing back recently, not the way he used to be able to, and figured it was probably because he was closer to fifty than he was to forty. His annual work-up had been fine, but his exhaustion remained. This time of year made him nostalgic, made him miss his grandmother and the way she'd spoiled him during Hannukah, and yet–

"Howdy, stranger." Robby, who'd been looking down at his shopping bags in an attempt to avoid acknowledging how crowded the mall was, found Jack Abbot standing before him when he raised his head. "Jeez, you look stressed out."

"Are you stalking me?" Robby asked, scooting over slightly as Jack settled onto the bench alongside him. "Hockey last week, the mall today…"

"Was hockey stalking if we drove there together?" Jack asked, leaning back on the bench and putting one arm on the back behind Robby, his other moving to rub at his leg. "Gotta say, it's strange to see a Jew out Christmas shopping."

Robby huffed a laugh, dragging his hand over his face and looking at Jack sidelong. Honestly, he might have looked tired but so did Jack, some silver beginning to show in his sideburns and along his temple. "You don't look too happy to be at the mall, either."

“I’m not,” Jack said, groaning. “It’s so busy here and my leg is killing me between all the walking and the cold. Turns out the excuse of getting your leg blown off in Afghanistan only gets you out of picking up gifts for your in-laws for so long.”

“Riley’s parents are visiting?”

“They fly in tonight,” Jack said. “And this might surprise you, but they don’t like me very much.”

“But you’re so likable,” Robby said, grinning when Jack elbowed him hard in the side. “Why don’t they like you?”

“It’s the stupidest shit,” Jack said. “Riley and I dated in eighth grade for maybe two months but I broke up with her because I was trying out for the high school football team. We didn’t start dating for real until we were in college and reconnected. I don’t even think she was bothered by our breakup in middle school because we were like, what, twelve? But her parents have literally never forgiven me.”

“Come on,” Robby said. “There’s absolutely no way her parents don’t like you solely because you broke up with her in middle school.”

“Uh, well, they also might have taken some issue with me putting med school on hold in order to do two tours in the Middle East,” Jack said. “And they probably weren’t too pleased that I got my leg blown off in the process.”

“Huh, that sounds more likely than your first answer,” Robby said. “Maybe you should have led with that.”

“But then how would you have known what a cool heartbreaker I was in middle school?” Jack asked. “I think that’s a pretty important part of my psyche for you to understand.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to understand your psyche,” Robby said, but he had to admit that since Jack had appeared he had felt infinitely better, his spiraling anxiety tempered by the other man’s presence. That, too, was a source of increasing sense of guilt recently. Where his feelings for Janey had been growing more and more platonic, there had been several instances where his feelings for Jack seemed to have been doing the opposite. Their monthly outings – hockey during the winter, baseball in the summer – had become a weekly meetup depending on their schedules, and even that sometimes didn’t seem enough. Sometimes they coordinated their admin shifts to overlap a little bit, hung out and finished their work in the cramped office together, and Robby recognized his feelings enough to know he was toeing a dangerous line.

Jack was married and Robby was very nearly the same. Robby wondered sometimes if he was suffering from some kind of ‘grass is greener’ complex, convinced that the ease with which he spent time with Jack was an illusion brought on by the fact that they didn’t spend every day together. This wasn’t his first time feeling this way about another man, though. That alone was enough to convince him that he needed to do some serious soul-searching, that maybe forty-five wasn’t too old to figure out some latent bisexuality even if it meant coming to terms with how he truly felt about Janey.

After all, he’d known about this before, even if he’d always been able to brush it off as a fluke of the moment or a side effect of his sensitive nature. He’d first noticed it when his grandmother had put him into Hebrew School to prepare for his bar mitzvah; at the end of that summer Robby had ended up kissing Bernard Rothfuss in the back row of *Cujo*. Thank God the other boy had kissed back with equal gusto, emboldening Robby’s awakening sexuality. The worsening AIDS epidemic, however, had put an end to that curiosity; Robby’s grandmother had been one of the few in the community to volunteer

to care for the dead and dying men, and he had seen firsthand what kind of misery it doled out.

He kept himself bottled up after that, tamped down that side of himself, and to be confronted now with a schoolboy crush on a coworker and friend was kind of insane.

“Have you had lunch yet?” Jack asked, breaking Robby out of his train of thought. “I think I need a break from shopping. Come on, my treat.”

“What an altruist,” Robby said, but he got to his feet alongside Jack nonetheless. The food court was just as busy as the rest of the mall but now that Robby wasn’t navigating the whole place on his own it felt a lot less overwhelming. Robby wasn’t sure he could pinpoint the moment where Jack’s presence had become less grating and more comforting, but affection for the other man had crept up on him over the last two years until it was simply a fact. They worked well together in their limited overlap at work, they got along well outside of work, and now Robby found that the malaise he’d been dealing with all day was lifted.

“I really forgot how much I hate the mall when I agreed to do this for Riley,” Jack groaned as he and Robby settled at a table near the outskirts of the food court. “I’m not even halfway done, either.”

“Same,” Robby said, taking a sip of his drink, grateful for the slight sugar hit. “I’m having a ton of trouble shopping for Janey this year.”

“Maybe we should shop together,” Jack offered, dumping his fries out onto the food court tray and pouring a generous amount of ketchup onto them, only stopping when Robby made a face. “What?”

“That’s so gross,” Robby said matter-of-factly. “That’s way too much ketchup.”

“Oh, come on,” Jack said. “Let me have one vice.”

“If your vice is ketchup, I feel bad for Riley.”

Jack made a face before dragging a fry through the ketchup, popping it in his mouth and looking around the food court. “In all seriousness, do you want to finish up our shopping together? I hate to admit it but the mall stresses me out. Might be better if we increase our numbers.”

“I’m fine with that,” Robby said, checking his watch. “Jake has dance class tonight so I have nothing else going on. Janey always takes advantage of it to take him out to dinner after.”

“That’s so cute,” Jack said, grinning. “You really lucked out there, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Robby said, guilt creeping up in the pit of his stomach as he remembered how much thought he’d been giving to his evolving feelings for Janey and what that might mean for his relationship with Jake in turn. He didn’t want to overestimate his importance in the kid’s life, but he had consistently been one of the only father figures Jake had. If he and Janey broke up, Robby didn’t want to lose that. He knew it was asking too much, but maybe it was still possible regardless. “You and Riley never thought about having kids?”

“We did, but my balls got blown off when I lost my leg,” Jack said just as Robby took another sip of his drink and making him choke with the effort not to spit it everywhere. Jack grinned when Robby met his gaze, shaking his head. “I’m joking. I don’t think we ever considered having kids to any real extent, but when people get too nosy I like to

hit them with that explanation to get them to back off." He paused, furrowing his brow. "Not that you were being nosy. I just thought it would make you laugh."

Robby dragged his hand over his mouth, briefly caught off guard, and smiled. "You are genuinely so strange."

"You like that, though," Jack said. "And to think you hated my guts before."

"I didn't hate your guts," Robby said, groaning. "I hated you being a hotshot. Besides, we're friends now, aren't we?"

"We are," Jack agreed around a mouthful of burger. "Do you really not celebrate Hanukkah? Did you ever?"

"Oh, yeah, I used to," Robby said. "My grandmother used to go all out. On the first day, she'd get me all excited, fry up these sufganiyot for me that she made from scratch. They're these little jelly-filled donuts, I guess? Although I'd almost say they're closer to a beignet. That's what I used to get in New Orleans when I was missing her. But I wasn't very devout to begin with and when she died I just kind of fell off. I do miss it sometimes, but Christmas with Jake and Janey is nice. I think it's mostly my grandmother's cooking that I miss, though."

"I get it," Jack said. "I was on tour for a couple of Christmases and it's hard to shake that nostalgia. Riley tried to send me these sugar cookies I like one year and they got broken in the mail, just crumbs when they arrived. I cried for most of the day."

Robby's heart did a little flip at the thought of Jack alone in the Middle East crying over broken sugar cookies and he had to busy

himself with his food, hoping his ears had not turned pink and given him away. This wasn't a real crush, he reminded himself. This had happened before with colleagues he found particularly impressive. Dr. Shen, for example, who was Jack's counterpart on the night shift. He liked the guy and found him easy to get along with despite his laidback attitude, and occasionally that meant that Shen evoked some similar feeling in him.

This was only professional admiration, nothing more.

"Are you a big Christmas guy, then?" Robby asked. "All out decorations, climbing on the roof, Clark Griswold-style?"

"Do I seem like that to you?" Jack asked, sounding alarmed. "Jeez, I hope that's not the fucking impression you've gotten."

Robby shrugged, crumpling up his burger wrapper. "I dunno, stranger things have happened. I worked with this guy in New Orleans and he seemed like the most take-no-shit man but when Christmas came around he went totally crazy. Had like five trees and a light display that required a radio station for the music to sync up properly. He made me help him one year and I don't think I've ever done that much physical labor in my entire life."

"Don't worry, I'm a normal Christmas guy," Jack said, gathering both his tray and Robby's and taking them to the trash can, a small gesture that nonetheless added to Robby's heart palpitations. "Mostly I just want to get through the season without becoming a statistic. Come on, let's get our shopping done. I'm sure we can think of something for Janey together."

They eventually did; Jack's list of gifts was so thorough that it was easy to gain inspiration, and by the time everything was said and done Robby had added a couple pairs of cozy pajamas, a slew of gardening

supplies, and a certificate for a weekend at a spa – complete with a break from both Robby and Jake – to his gift pile. The psychic damage, however, had been done. He had spent an easy, fun day with Jack and the result was that his misgivings of the morning were more pronounced than ever.

On the drive home he decided to give it a few more months, but if he reached March and his conviction that he loved Janey not as a girlfriend but as a friend persisted he would need to act. It simply wasn't fair to pretend otherwise and could only damage her and Jake further down the line. There, too, was an underlying sense that his feelings for Jack were not strictly platonic, although it obviously wasn't something he could act on.

Still, it was an exploration that had to be made. Robby was the type of man who had to come at things from every angle, think them through entirely before he acted, and while years of working in emergency medicine meant he could make medical decisions on the fly without adopting a placid pace, his personal life required a lot more scrutiny. He could only hope that this was a passing thing, that his feelings for Jack would stabilize and become clearly platonic.

Robby was not someone who particularly enjoyed yearning.

"Merry Christmas," Robby said, pulling on a beanie to defend somewhat against the freshly falling snow coming down outside the ER. It had been a long shift and he was ready to go home, only to have been stopped by one of his students on the way out to ask him if he was working the next day. Robby had barely managed to extricate himself with the explanation that he always worked Christmas Day and was turning to leave when he nearly knocked into Jack, who had a hoodie pulled on over his scrubs and melting snowflakes in his hair. "Shit, sorry."

“You should check your locker,” Jack said, having caught Robby’s elbow to steady him. “Not for any important reason.”

Robby stared at him, somewhat flummoxed. “I didn’t get you anything for Christmas.”

“I didn’t get you anything for Christmas, either,” Jack said, letting go of him after a few more seconds of touch. “See you later, Robby. And, uh, today’s the first day of Hanukkah, right?”

Robby immediately knew what that meant, his chest lurching slightly the way it did when he was stricken by sudden and intense emotion. Jack had already walked away and Robby was grateful that he wouldn’t have a witness, heading to his locker and putting in his combination. They knew each other’s locker combinations solely out of convenience at this point and yet Robby wasn’t prepared for what he found when he opened it, immediately hit by the smell of matzah ball soup.

There was an insulated tote bag in his locker where his usual items normally were, and when Robby unzipped it he found that it was filled to the brim with containers of food. Matzah ball soup, of course, but brisket and latkes and even the sufganiyot he’d mentioned to Jack nearly a month prior, a veritable treasure trove of food from his childhood.

There was a card sitting on top and Robby lifted it out, leaning his forehead against the side of his locker as he read it over. The handwriting wasn’t Jack’s spidery scrawl, the penmanship way too good to belong to his colleague, so Robby had to assume it was Riley who had written the note instead.

Robby,

When Jack and I moved back to Pittsburgh, I was worried about Jack. My family is here but his is pretty far away and I was worried about the adjustment to civilian life after so long in the military. When he met you, I thought for sure you would make things worse. He was so upset that you had called him out, but after two years I'm glad that he can call you a colleague and friend. He mentioned that you missed your grandmother's food, so I asked one of my friends if she knew any good Jewish takeout in the area. She did me one better! Enjoy your dinner courtesy of my friend's grandmother, and thank you for everything!

Riley

There was a PS included at the bottom, this in Jack's scrawl. *You and Janey are invited for New Year's Eve, by the way. Riley is dying to meet you now.*

Robby read through the note twice, admittedly stunned that someone had gone out of their way to do something like this for him, and then peered into the tote bag again. It had been years since he'd had anything homemade at this level and he was so unbelievably touched that he thought he genuinely might cry. He glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone else was around before zipping the tote back up and carefully removing it from his locker, his mind already racing with ideas of how to pay them back.

He had noticed it yet, but he couldn't stop grinning like an idiot.

Chapter End Notes

The romance is coming now, but it's creeping up slowly... As always, if you like this, consider checking out some of my original novels published under the pen name Lee Ohlson! If you're into Hucklerabbot, I've got a couple of those posted on my account as well and a Thanksgiving one-shot planned for Thursday.

Chapter 4: 2017

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2017

June had settled over Pittsburgh in a muggy haze, the entire city miserable as a multi-day heatwave stretched on with no relief in sight. Robby, whose entire year had been shitty, was finding patient complaints even more difficult to stomach than usual. Everyone was impatient, grouchy, and for a man who'd been dumped in March and diagnosed with high blood pressure in May he was reaching the end of his rope.

He was making his way back from triage where a man had just spit on one of the nurses when Dana waved him down. "I handled it," he said, and when she raised her eyebrows he sighed. "The spitter. I kicked him out."

"Oh, well, good, but that's not what I wanted," she said. "Can you please take the patient in Room 11?"

Robby leaned back to look at the board, scanning the list before landing on Room 11. "Syncope?" he clarified, frowning at Dana. "Shouldn't one of the students take that?"

"No, I really think you should," Dana said, and before she was pulled away by another task she gave him a look both intense and pitying. Fear gripped him briefly and he turned away from the hub to head back to where Room 11 sat on the corner just before Pedes.

The curtain was pulled across in front of the bed as he entered and he gripped both ends of his stethoscope, the rubber biting into the back of his neck grounding him as he approached. "I'm going to open the curtain," he said, and when he pulled it aside his heart sank. "Riley?"

Riley Abbot had become a staple in Robby's life over the last half year, as good a friend to him as her husband was. She'd been there when his relationship with Janey had come to its inevitable end – a surprisingly mutual agreement, it turned out, and one that saw him with as much access to Jake as before – and had proven an excellent foil to her husband. Funny, smart, and driven, she worked as a psychiatrist across town and seeing her in this setting, sitting on a hospital bed with a blanket draped over her lap, was jarring.

"Oh, good," she said, smiling up at him; there was something so tired in her eyes, however, that it made the pit in his stomach even deeper. He had always thought her pretty; about his age and with dirty blonde hair that currently fell in waves around her face, she had an openness about her that was disarming. "I asked Dana if she could make sure you were sent in."

"What's going on?" Robby asked, hooking his foot around the nearby stool and pulling it over to the bed. He sat down, the first time he'd managed to do so all day, and looked at her intently. "The board just said you fainted. Can you walk me through it?"

"I was at the grocery store and I just… I got dizzy and went down," she said, twisting her hands in her lap. "I hit my head on one of the shelves so I guess they thought it would be safer to bring me here than let me go home."

"Where's Jack?" Robby asked. "Does he not know?"

"He was asleep when I went shopping," she said. "I asked them not to call him because I wanted to talk to you first."

His feeling of dread began to deepen; Riley was avoiding his gaze, her

eyes still on her hands, and Robby had delivered bad news enough times to recognize when it was about to be delivered to him in return. “You know why you fainted, then.”

She breathed out, finally raising her head to look at him again. “I don’t want to put this on you, Robby, but I don’t have anywhere else to turn and I know how much Jack trusts you.”

“You can put whatever you want on me,” Robby said frankly. “You’re just as much my friend as Jack is, you know that.” He leaned back on the stool to check how busy the ER looked, knowing full well that Dana would stop anyone from coming to look for him until it was absolutely necessary, and turned back to Riley. “We have some time. Talk.”

“Has Jack told you anything about when he was deployed?” she began, and when Robby shook his head she sighed. “I figured but I still hoped. He’s cagey about his deployment which I understand but it would be nice if he could open up to you. Anyway, during his first deployment, I started to get these migraines. They would paralyze me for hours to the point where I couldn’t do anything except stay in bed. I finally went to the doctor and they told me that I had a tumour pressing against my brain stem. The treatment was risky, but I’ve been in remission for over ten years now.”

“Riley–” he said quietly, and she waved her hand.

“Hold on. I had my yearly scan a couple weeks ago and they found several large masses. They want to do a biopsy, but… I know what it is. It’s back and that's why I fainted today, and I haven’t told Jack yet. I asked for you because I need your help. I don’t want to be the one to tell him.” She had begun to cry, her voice weepy even as she tried to wipe away her tears. “I just don’t understand how he can make it through Iraq and get back here just for me to get fucking brain cancer.”

Robby let go of his stethoscope, which he'd been gripping so tightly that there was now a red mark across the back of his neck, and took both her hands in his to stop her from twisting them together. “Take a deep breath,” he said, squeezing her hands. “I’m going to have Dana call Jack and I can talk to him, but right now it’s okay for you to worry about yourself.” He ran his thumbs over the back of her hands, unsurprised when she leaned into him to rest her head against his shoulder.

A surge of guilt struck Robby, not because of her affection for him but because of what he had recognized as a steadily growing affection for Jack. It felt like a betrayal to both of them, Riley because she undoubtedly thought that his feelings for Jack were of the normal friendship variety and Jack because he had done nothing to elicit a crush in the first place. Robby had seen the writing on the wall with Janey a while ago, burnt out from work and emotionally unavailable, but his latent bisexuality had certainly sped things along.

He shoved those feelings down, a coping mechanism he had mastered over the years, and raised one hand to grip the back of her neck. “I’m going to go and tell Dana to get Jack down here. I have to do my rounds while we wait for him, but if you need anything at all let the nurses know and I’ll come back. I can treat your head from where you fell, but do you have an appointment with your oncologist scheduled?”

“In two weeks,” she said, pulling her head back to look at him. Her eyes were dry now but she looked tired and Robby tugged her into a brief hug. “I’m sorry to drag you into this.”

“You’re not dragging me into anything,” Robby said reassuringly, letting go of her before getting to his feet. “Do you want me to tell Jack everything when he gets here or do you just want me to tell him you fainted?”

“I’ll tell him,” she said softly. “I just want to make sure that he can come to you after I do.”

“Okay,” Robby said, resting his hand on her head briefly before making his way out to the hub. He caught Dana’s gaze while she was mid-conversation with one of the other nurses and she hurried over, looking up at him with clear worry. “Can you call Jack?” he asked before she could say anything. “Riley thinks he’s still asleep from his shift last night.”

“Yeah, of course,” she said, putting a hand on his bicep. “Is she okay?”

“I, uh… I’ll tell you after Jack gets here,” he said, stress building up deep in his chest. “Give me a shout when he does, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said. “There’s a car accident coming in for Trauma Two. I told Adamson you’d meet him over there.”

“Got it,” Robby said, boxing up what Riley had told him so he could focus on what was coming next. There was no room for him to dwell on Riley and Jack at the moment and it was a boon, the grind of the emergency room a good distraction for what he was feeling now, the expanding hole in his chest. The trauma patient came in and Robby turned the personal part of his mind off, focusing entirely on the task at hand as they got the man stabilized, he and Adamson working in tandem the same way they always did, an extension of one another.

From there, it was one emergency after another as though the universe had heard that Robby needed time to avoid what was happening in Room 11. It was nearly an hour after he’d first gone in to see Riley when he was able to pull himself away from patients, finding Dana in the break room inhaling a granola bar. “Is Jack still in there with her?” he asked quietly, touching her on the elbow.

“He just went up to the roof,” she said. “Told me he doesn’t want to take her home until he has a chance to talk with you. Do you want me to let Adamson know you went up there?”

“Please,” Robby said. “I’ve got my pager on me if anything comes up. I just need fifteen minutes or so.”

“I got you,” she said, patting him on the arm. “Now go.”

“I’m going,” he said, putting his hands up in surrender as he made a beeline for the elevator.

When he got to the roof, Jack was on the other side of the safety railing. He was sitting on the sun-soaked concrete, his back against the bars as he stared out at the city, and he didn’t look up when Robby approached. Robby rested his arms against the top of the railing, looking out at the city, the heat coming up off the streets in waves. He couldn’t remember a hotter summer since he’d returned to Pittsburgh, but he’d been saying that every summer.

Jack lolled his head forward onto his arms and spoke finally, his voice muffled against his skin. “When she got cancer the first time, I was furloughed. I came back and she did treatments, she got better, and I thought that it was safe for me to go back to active duty. I told myself that when I was done, we'd have the rest of our lives together. It’d pay for school and it’d put us in a good spot financially, and then I got my fucking leg blown off and came home early.”

He sighed, tilting his head back to look at Robby. A jolt of electricity went through Robby when he realized Jack had been crying and he looked away, feeling the color rush to his neck and cheeks. “I just wanted to grow old with her,” Jack said, and there was a quiver in his

voice. “Maybe it was fucking stupid of me to think that I could have that in the first place.”

“It’s not stupid of you,” Robby said quietly, rubbing at the side of his neck. “And this isn’t a death sentence, Jack. If she starts treatment there’s no telling what could happen.”

“She’s got three fucking tumors this time,” Jack said, his breathing shaky. Robby wished he didn’t feel so impotent, wished he had the guts to reach over the railing and touch him to provide some comfort, but it seemed impossible. “Three! Just the one last time took almost everything out of her. We’re fifteen years older now and I’ve wasted most of that time in school and not with her.”

“We’re not her oncologist,” Robby said. “And we don’t know how bad it is. Besides–”

“I need help,” Jack said, and Robby looked down at him to find that Jack had tilted his head back and was looking at him intently. “I know that you probably don’t want to be involved in this at all, But I just need help.”

“You’ve got help,” Robby said. “Will you come onto this side of the railing at least? We can talk better over here.”

“Just sit down and I’ll come back over when we’re done talking,” Jack said, Robby sinking obediently to the ground and resting his back against the railing so they were sitting almost back to back.. The rails were warm through his scrub shirt but so was Jack’s arm, the heat of his bare skin brushing against Robby’s every so often and driving him nearly crazy. He hated himself for thinking this now, unable to shut that part of his mind off despite what Jack was facing, and it filled him with so much shame that he squeezed his eyes shut briefly, glad Jack couldn’t see him. “I don’t have family here, Robby, and I know

her parents will come help if I ask but they don't live here."

"You do have family here," Robby said. "You've had a family since you started in the Pitt. If you need things, just ask and we can get it done. But you don't have to handle this alone, you or Riley." It was so strange to be in a position where he was so impotent, unable to help Riley as a patient or Jack as a friend, and he selfishly wished that he had remained disliking Jack so he didn't have to be in this position right now. "I'm sorry. I know I'm not being much help."

"You're being way more help than you think," Jack said. He pressed the back of his arm against Robby's, the skin-to-skin contact so intimate that Robby was momentarily caught off guard. He had struggled his entire life with emotion, feeling far too much at times and far too little at others. What he was feeling for Jack seemed illicit in a way that he could hardly understand and wrapped in the emotion of the day Robby was certain he was the biggest scumbag on the planet. "When you asked me last Christmas if we had thought about having kids, I… we did think about it. We tried for a bit, too, before I was deployed, but when she first had cancer she decided that she didn't want to have a baby if she was going to bring it into a world where its mother might get cancer again at any time. I never begrudged it but I also really never thought she would get sick again. I figured we'd been through enough. If we didn't have kids, at least I'd have her. I feel so selfish but now I won't have either."

"You're not selfish, but she's also not dead yet. There's a chance she can pull herself out of this." Robby turned his head to look at Jack, Jack looking back at him in return. "Come on, let's head back down. The longer you avoid it the worst you'll feel in the end."

"You're right," Jack said, sighing and pushing himself slowly to his feet. He clambered over the railing and held out a hand to pull Robby up, keeping their hands twined together for a moment longer as he looked Robby in the face. "Thank you. For being here today and for offering to help going forward."

“It’s not just an offer,” Robby said, squeezing Jack’s hand in return. “I’ve got you and Riley’s back no matter what.”

He said that, but as soon as he was back to work, as soon as they’d left the ER, he was swallowed up with an ennui that he really hadn’t experienced since the days following Katrina. It was a miserable kind of torture, his hands tied in the worst possible way. He could tell Jack and Riley that he would help them, but what could he actually do?

The last half of his shift passed slowly and Robby was planning on calling Riley as soon as he was done for the day, getting his stuff out of his locker when a hand came to rest on his shoulder. “Michael, do you have a second to talk?”

Robby looked over at Adamson, unsurprised to find that his mentor had sought him out. “Yeah, of course. I’ll walk with you to your car.”

They stepped out into the muggy night and Adamson sighed, hoisting his bag over his shoulder. “I hope this heatwave breaks soon.”

“I think it’s supposed to,” Robby said, glancing briefly skyward like it would tell him the weather. “I’m guessing you talked to Jack.”

“He’ll be taking a leave of absence once Riley begins chemo,” Adamson said. “I’ve already made sure that we have enough coverage. I wanted to check on you, though.”

“Me?” Robby asked. “I’m fine.”

“You might have been able to fool me ten years ago but you definitely can’t fool me now,” Adamson said, stopping at the end of his car and

resting against it as he looked at Robby. “You wear your emotions on your sleeve, and you've been withdrawn all day. You’re allowed to be upset.”

Robby looked past him, his heart in his throat as he considered what Adamson was saying. He knew that his face was an open book but the emotion he usually felt was stress, not this level of helplessness. “I know,” he said after a moment. “Listen, I know we don’t really talk about personal things that often, but Jack and Riley are important to me. I am bothered by this whole thing but it’s because I’m not used to people I care about being sick like this. I don’t know how to handle it.”

“Offer to make them dinner, drive Riley to doctor’s appointments,” Adamson said. “Just be there, that’s it. That’s all I would want and I’m sure it’s all they want from you, too. Sometimes even asking what you can do to help can be too much, so just pay attention and do things you know they’d appreciate.”

Robby listened to Adamson the way he always did, although now he was on the verge of telling the older man everything he’d been struggling with: his latent bisexuality, his growing attraction to Jack, the betrayal he felt he was inflicting on Riley because of it. He bit back that admission, however; Adamson was the most patient man he knew, but even this felt like overstepping the boundaries in some tangible way. “I’ll do what I can,” he said after a moment more of silence. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

He was already fishing his earbuds out of his pocket when Adamson laughed, shaking his head. “That wasn’t the only thing I wanted to talk to you about, you know.”

“Oh, sorry,” Robby said, surprised. “That seemed like the most important thing.”

“I just wanted to say that I've known you a long time and that it’s nice to see you have Jack as a friend,” Adamson said, clapping Robby on the arm. “That’s the most important part. You’ve always been friendly with everyone around here but it’s good to know that you’re capable of having a social life.”

“I’m not completely anti-social,” Robby said, smiling back at him. “Have a good night, Montgomery. And for what it’s worth, I consider you a friend, too.”

Adamson squeezed his arm before letting go, turning back to his car as Robby put his earbuds in and turned his music on. All he wanted to do was call Jack and see how he was doing, ask if he and Riley were okay, but he didn’t want to intrude on the time they had left. Today had left him feeling like such a creep that it was hard to know if he was in the right to reach out to Jack or not.

He was walking up his front pathway when his music stopped and his phone began to ring. Robby pulled it out of his pocket, putting his glasses on so he could read the screen, and immediately saw Jack’s name on the screen. His mouth dry, Robby rubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand before answering. “Hey. Did you guys get home okay?”

“Yeah,” Jack said, voice slightly tinny. “I meant to text you but Riley and I started talking and I lost track of time. I still really needed to talk to you, though.”

“What’s going on?”

There was an extended silence on the other side of the phone and for a minute Robby thought he’d unplugged his headphones before Jack spoke again. “I just really wanted to tell you that today… I’m glad that Riley felt like she could go to you. She told me that she

specifically asked to be taken to the Pitt because she knew you were there. It means a lot to know that we're in a position where we can lean on you like that."

Robby closed his eyes, resting his forehead against his front door with his key in the lock. He should have told Adamson about his feelings, should have told *anyone*, because being confronted with this now was choking him. "You know I've got your back. You both were there for me when Janey and I broke up. Obviously this is more serious, but still."

"I was close to a lot of guys in the military but you're really the first civilian I feel this way about," Jack said, a pang of guilt jolting through Robby. "Having you around has been good for both me and Riley."

"I feel the same way," Robby said, lying through his teeth. Scum, absolute scum. How touch-starved, love-sick, *selfish* could one man be? "Jack, I meant what I said earlier. You both can lean on me."

"I know," Jack said. There was another long pause and Robby finally unlocked his door, stepping into his dark front hall. After an interminable time, Jack spoke again, his voice low and almost husky. "Thank you again for today. I owe you a ton."

"Any time," Robby said in return, flicking on his hall light as an immense loneliness settled over him. "Let Riley know I'm thinking of her."

Jack hung up and Robby pocketed his phone, tilting his head back to stare at his ceiling as everything that had happened that day caught up with him. "Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

Literally all I was thinking this chapter was how little I want to kill off Riley. I don't know why but I immediately thought of her as Laura Dern and I think that probably doesn't help with my reluctance.

Chapter 5: 2018

Chapter Notes

> I really want to thank everyone for their super kind comments so far! As you can probably tell by my profile, I've been out of the fanfiction game for a long time, and even when I was in it before I wasn't a chapter fic person. I'm so happy people have been enjoying it. I also apologize in advance for this chapter... I cried a little bit while writing it, but I'm sure it's fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2018

“Do you need me to pick up anything else?” Robby asked, holding his phone to one ear as he juggled a gallon of milk in the other, the handle still cold from the fridge unit he was standing in front of. “Milk, coffee… I got a box of that tea that Riley has been drinking, too.”

“We might be good?” Jack said, humming softly in thought on the other side of the line. “Hold on, let me ask Riley. Rie, Robby’s just at the grocery store grabbing us milk. Do you need anything?”

“You can get dessert if you want, Robby,” Riley said into the phone. “But hurry up. The takeout guy is almost here.”

“Okay, okay,” Robby said. “I’ll see you guys in ten minutes. If you realize you need something else, text me.” He hung up, smiling briefly at his phone before pocketing it and bending down to pick his basket up off the floor. After adding a cherry cheesecake to the other groceries he used the self-checkout and headed out onto the street, reusable bag in hand and dressed for the late March weather.

The sidewalks were slushy from the recent show, the grey and ugly stuff that accumulated at the end of winter, and Robby had his winter boots on, jeans tucked into them unfashionably. With a dark blue Carhartt jacket pulled over a white t-shirt, he was warm but not unseasonably so, although his face felt hot the way it always did when he was on his way to Jack and Riley’s.

It had been nearly ten months since Riley had first been diagnosed and things had settled into a familiar groove. Jack had returned to work, and he, Robby, and Dana had come up with a schedule that

allowed them to take Riley to her daily radiation therapy; between the three of them, there wasn't a day of the week that wasn't covered. The Abbots's freezer was full with various casseroles and meals provided by the entirety of the Pitt, Janey (who had remained friends with Riley even after she and Robby had broken up) was coming over on Sundays to help with any housework, and Robby's guilt had grown exponentially because he was the happiest he thought he'd ever been.

He'd taken the T from his place, accustomed to making the weekly trek across town for the one evening of overlap he and Jack usually had in terms of days off. The three of them would eat dinner together – usually takeout from one of the several restaurants they liked the best – and watch whatever show they had recorded based on the day. Riley was in an off-cycle for her radiation therapy and it meant her appetite was usually better, her energy a little higher. Aside from a tremor in her hands and infrequent migraines, she was still all right, as all right as someone with brain cancer could be.

She was dying, and yet in the process Robby had found a place of comfort he hadn't known in his entire adult life. He knew it couldn't last, but he desperately hoped it would.

"What did you get for dessert?" Riley asked as soon as she opened the door, taking the bag out of his hand and inspecting it. "Cheesecake. You're a mind reader, seriously."

"Hello to you, too," Robby said, stepping inside and leaning down to undo his boots. "Smells good in here."

"I ordered from that Indian place you like," Jack said, passing through the front hall of the house on his way from the kitchen to the living room with their usual plates. "More accurately, Riley decided she wanted korma. I got you saag paneer, though. Is that okay?"

“That’s great,” Robby said, putting his boots alongside Jack and Riley’s by the front door. “I’m a creature of habit.”

“Oh, we know,” Riley said, carrying the groceries into the kitchen as Robby walked into the living room after Jack. “You are so predictable.”

“You two knew what you were getting when you decided to be friends with me,” Robby said, settling onto the end of the couch closest to the door, Jack at the opposite end. Riley came out after a moment, her spot in between them on the couch, and Robby looked over at her, startled as he was every week by how frail she was beginning to look.

She was wearing one of Jack’s beanies, pulled low over her now-bald scalp, and had lost weight that she really didn’t have to lose in the first place, making her look swallowed up in Jack’s hoodie. The radiation therapy, combined with a chemotherapy wafer they’d implanted after removing one of the masses, had taken a toll on her, but Robby had realized just how much fight she still had in her.

“Are you up for Survivor?” Jack asked, hand already on the remote, and Robby nodded. “Good.”

It was after ten by the time they wound down; an episode of Survivor turned into a second episode, and then Food Network on in the background as they played a few rounds of cribbage. Riley had fallen asleep on Jack’s lap, her toes pushed under Robby’s thigh to ward off the cold that seemed to consistently plague her, and Jack and Robby were sitting in companionable silence when Jack spoke. “Do you want to stay the night in the guest room?”

“Huh?” Robby asked, looking over at him in surprise. After nearly a year of these weekly dinners, he’d never anticipated being asked to stay the night and it made him weirdly nervous. “I don’t have any

pajamas or anything."

"You wear pajamas?" Jack asked, raising his eyebrows, and it made Robby's stomach twist up until he turned his gaze back to the TV to avoid it. "I can give you a pair of sweats and we have an extra toothbrush around here somewhere. Come on, you don't work tomorrow. It'll make me feel better than you taking the T home at night."

"I'm almost fifty, Jack. I don't need a chaperone on the subway."

"That's not what I mean," Jack said, and there was a slight note of frustration in his voice that made Robby look at him out of the corner of his eye again. "Look, I'm sure it's gonna come as no great surprise that we like having you around. Riley and I talked about it and we like the idea of you being able to stay here some nights so you don't have such a trek to get to our place every single week. If the situation was different, we'd be able to come to your place sometimes, but…"

"Okay, okay, I get it," Robby groused, although he wasn't actually annoyed; in fact, he was kind of touched. "I don't mind spending the night if it's okay with you. You sleep in, though, don't you?"

"Yeah, the early riser thing kind of went out the window when I switched to night shifts," Jack said, his hand on Riley's neck, thumb sliding over her skin. "If you spend the night, you get to make Riley breakfast, though. That's always a treat."

"Oh, my treat for spending the night is that I get to make your wife dinner?" Robby asked, looking over at Jack to find that Jack was looking at him, his dark eyes shaded in the dim light of the living room. "What?"

“You know, last time I took her to chemotherapy…” Jack began, trailing off after a moment. “Never mind. It’s stupid.”

“No, you started to say it, so say it,” Robby said, although it made his chest hurt when he thought about what Jack might have to say. There was something in the way Jack was looking at him that made Robby think there was an undercurrent he couldn’t quite understand.

“There was this young nurse at the clinic and, uh, I hadn’t seen her before. She seemed super confused when I was waiting for Riley to finish up and she finally came over and asked me…” He paused, and this time when he met Robby’s gaze there was no missing the intensity there. “She asked me if we were a throuple.”

Robby stared at him, the word Jack had just used entirely unfamiliar but easy enough to parse out. Three plus couple seemed pretty self-explanatory, but what wasn’t self-explanatory was why Jack was telling him. “What did you say to her?”

“What would you have liked me to say?” Jack asked.

That was not what Robby was expecting in the slightest and yet before he could ask what Jack meant Riley was stirring, stretching her legs out and pressing her feet harder against Robby’s thigh. Robby looked down at her legs and realized exactly what Jack had been implying: he had let his relationship with Riley become inappropriate. In focusing on Jack, he’d never even thought that he might come off as being interested in Riley instead.

“What are you two talking about?” Riley murmured, rubbing at her face. “What time is it?”

“Robby’s going to spend the night,” Jack said, looking down at her as

she sat up slowly.

“I’m actually going to head to bed,” Robby said, getting to his feet; instead of looking pleased or angry, Jack looked disappointed, his eyes creasing at the corners as he looked up at Robby. “Sorry, it’s past when I normally go to bed. Can I get those sweats from you, Jack?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack said, getting to his feet after he made sure Riley was sitting up entirely. “Come on, we’ll grab them.” He followed Robby out of the living room and led him upstairs, heading into his bedroom to his dresser. He paused with the sweats in his hands, turning back to look at Robby. “I hope I didn’t offend you,” he said finally.

“You didn’t,” Robby said quickly.

“I just thought the throuple thing was funny or I wouldn’t have brought it up,” Jack said, holding out the sweats. “I really didn’t mean anything else by it.”

“It’s fine,” Robby said, hating how his pulse had quickened so much. “I mean it, Jack. It’s good.”

“Okay,” Jack said, but he didn’t sound particularly convinced. “There’s an extra toothbrush in the guest bathroom for you already.”

“Thanks for letting me stay,” Robby said, walking down the hallway before pausing at the top of the stairs and looking down them. “Good night, Riley!”

“Good night!” she called back,still clearly in the living room. “Are you gonna make me breakfast in the morning?”

Robby laughed despite himself, nodding despite knowing she couldn't see it. "Sure, I'll make you breakfast. See you in the morning."

It wasn't until he was in bed on the brink of falling asleep that he was struck by a lightning bolt of realization, one that nearly had him sit up straight. Instead he huffed and rolled over to press his face into the pillow, seized by a delusion so teenager-like that he couldn't help but feel amused despite the heat that rushed to his head when he realized that Jack might not have been accusing him of anything at all.

He might have been gauging how Robby reacted to the idea.

After one of the worst nights of sleep of his life – due mostly in part to his racing thoughts, and not at all because of the quality of the guest room – Robby awoke at a little after seven, the house silent around him. He left on the sweats Jack had lent him and shrugged on the white t-shirt he'd been wearing the day before, brushing his teeth before he headed downstairs.

He wasn't surprised to find Riley in the kitchen already, sitting in the breakfast nook and waiting for the electric kettle to boil. She was in a cardigan that was loose on her thin frame and a matching pajama top and bottoms covered with small seahorses, and she grinned at him a little tiredly. "I thought you would sneak out before I was up."

"I promised to make you breakfast, didn't I?" Robby asked, walking over to the coffee maker and pouring himself a cup just as the kettle began to boil. He took care of Riley's tea, carrying it over to her along with the cream that she usually liked to have in it, and settled into the nook across from her. "What do you want to eat?"

“Oh, I was messing with you,” Riley said, resting her chin on her hand and looking at him. “I told Jack to tell you that so you'd stay the night.”

“It was your idea,” Robby said, not surprised now that he had said it out loud. “Of course.”

“I wanted a chance to talk to you for a bit,” she said, and there was a tone in her voice much like the one she’d had the previous summer when she’d first told him she was sick.

He looked at her, anxiety curling up in his stomach like a snake, heavy and leaden. “What’s going on?”

“I’m going to stop treatment,” she said, not beating around the bush whatsoever. “I had my check-in last week and the tumors aren’t shrinking, and one of them has gotten bigger. It’s not working, and I don’t… I don’t think it’s going to start working. Neither do my doctors.”

“Riley,” Robby said, holding his coffee mug with both hands as he looked at her. He could see it as plain as day, though. She was dead serious, this obviously something she had been thinking about for a while, even before she’d gotten the news from her oncologist. “I genuinely don’t know what I can say.”

She shrugged, still watching him. “When I first got the news, you know how badly I wanted to fight this. But I’m tired now, and it’s not getting better, and the radiation is making me so fucking sick. I want the chance to spend however long I have left with my husband and my friends without feeling the way I feel now.”

“I… I really didn’t expect this to be what you wanted to talk about,”

Robby said, although he wasn't surprised it had come to this point. Jack had told him several times that Riley was fighting an uphill battle, but to be faced with it like this was a stark misery.

She raised her eyebrows at Robby, a slight smirk twitching at the corner of her lips. "Oh, did you think I wanted to talk to you about how all the nurses at the clinic think that we're in a throuple and that Dana is my sister?"

Robby felt heat flood up his neck and over his ears and he groaned, looking down at his coffee. "I shouldn't be surprised that Jack said he told me."

"He really thought he hurt your feelings," Riley said, studying Robby's face closely. "I don't think you really realize how much easier you've made this last year, Robby. I genuinely don't know what we would have done without you." She reached out across the table and gripped his wrist, her fingers cool against his skin. "Don't freak out about what I'm going to say."

"What could you possibly say that is worse than telling me you're ready to die?" Robby asked, but he could see something in her eyes that scared him even before she spoke.

"I know you love Jack."

Robby stared at her, breathing out through his nose in an attempt to keep himself calm. "I love both of you," he finally said slowly, trying to get his feet back under him. He had never felt so exposed in his life and there was part of him that thought he might be sick, the only thing keeping him in his seat the desire to convince Riley that she had misunderstood. "You're very good friends to me and I love you both the way I'd love any friend."

“Robby,” she said, gripping his wrist tighter and leaning forward across the table. “I know you’re in love with Jack. Don’t shut down on me. I brought it up because I need to talk to you about it, okay? That’s all.”

Robby honestly felt as though he might cry, blinking to hopefully fight off the tears he could feel stinging in the inside corners of his eyes. “Does he know?”

“Of course not,” she said. “I won’t tell him. It’s none of my business.”

“Riley,” he said harshly, leaning towards her in turn. “I’m in– I have feelings for your husband! How is that not your business?”

“What, are you going to have an affair with him while his wife is dying of cancer?” Riley asked, raising her eyebrows. “You’re not Dr. Seuss.”

“That still doesn’t make it okay,” Robby said. “I shouldn’t–”

“Why?” Robby flicked his gaze over her face, her eyes showing absolutely no sign of anger. “Robby, why shouldn’t you?”

Robby, who usually considered himself at least moderately intelligent, was so stupefied by this argument that he just sat there for a moment, one hand still on his coffee mug and the other in Riley’s grasp. “I don’t understand,” he finally said, and she let go of him to return to her tea.

“So you’re in love with Jack. He’s married, and he’s faithful, and you

aren't the sort of person who would ever in a thousand years try to entice someone into adultery. I'm not mad at you for loving him, Robby. I'm sad for you more than anything else, and I'm sad for me, but I'm not mad. Did you break up with Janey because of Jack?"

"No, of course not," Robby said, a note of submission creeping into his voice; it was clear that as well as he thought he'd been hiding things, he hadn't been doing a very good job at all. "Janey and I weren't doing well already, and then… I realized I might be bisexual, and that didn't help, but it wasn't the nail in the coffin." He glanced towards the stairs, glad that he'd be able to see Jack before he could get close enough to overhear any sort of conversation. "This is a heavy conversation, Riley."

"Why do you think I wanted to have it?" She was no longer smirking, her expression more somber than he liked it, and he realized that she was also on the brink of tears. "I've had a long time to come to terms with dying. I'm not scared of death at this point, but I'm so, so scared of what will happen to Jack. I used to have this nightmare, the first time I got sick, where I was dead and he was sitting in our living room with a gun to his head and I couldn't do anything. I keep seeing that in my head now, and I know… He's going to need you, Robby. I'm going to die. Maybe not for months, maybe not for another year, but eventually it'll happen, and I need you to be there for him. I need you to love him."

Robby knew that she had made up her mind, that any suggestions of different doctors or more treatment would not change it. He also knew that the idea of dragging Jack out of an abyss he could not understand frightened him in a way he hadn't been frightened since he'd been a little boy. "I feel like I've betrayed you," he said finally, his voice soft, and she shook her head.

"You haven't. I know Jack thinks that we haven't had enough time together and there's more that he wants to do, but the situation can't change now. I'll be dead, and he'll need you. And if in two years, five years, whatever, he realizes that he loves you, too, I won't begrudge you that, Robby." She squeezed his wrist, her fingers light against his

pulse. “I didn’t tell you I knew to make you feel guilty. I told you I knew so you didn’t have to hold onto it alone. I know you well enough by now to know that if I died and you didn’t know how I felt in return, your guilt would hold you back.”

“It shouldn’t be on your shoulders to comfort the guy who’s–”

Riley pinched him hard on the inside of his wrist and he pulled his hand back, hissing. “You’re not the guy who did anything,” she said. “Unless you’re about to say the guy who drove me to a thousand appointments, or the guy who changed his whole schedule so he could make sure I didn’t have to be sick and alone, or the guy who has been the sort of friend to me and Jack that most people will never have in their lives. I don’t want to hear it. Just promise me you’ll be there for him.”

“I promise,” Robby said, nodding stoically. “I’ll be there for him when you die, and I’ll be there for both of you until that day comes.”

“Good,” Riley said, taking a sip of her tea and swallowing before grinning at him. “And you know, if you need extra motivation, I’ve always had a threesome on my bucket list.”

“Shut up,” Robby said, laughing despite the well of sorrow that was beginning to carve a hollow space in his chest. “You’re going to make fun of me for this forever, aren’t you?”

“Obviously,” she said. “Now come on, make me breakfast. You promised.”

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you for reading! I'm going to be updating a little more frequently because I'm really trying to get my next novel finished by January, and my motivation for that is obviously that every

time I finish a chapter, I get to write a chapter of this.

Normally, I HATE killing off female characters. It bums me out and they don't deserve it, but in the case of this story there are two obvious huge factors in play: one, that Shawn Hatosy has confirmed that Jack is a widower; two, that I am slowly trying to shift Robby from a 'normal' doctor to a man suffering from serious PTSD and anxiety. We all know what's going to happen to him in 2020, so giving a parallel between Jack and Robby in terms of their suffering and loss was important.

I've got a new chapter fic posted -- pure Hucklerobby -- and I'm aiming to get out both Hucklerobby and Samira/Mel fics around Christmas, so if that interests you, keep an eye out!

Chapter 6: 2019

Chapter Notes

> I was hoping to have this out sooner but I have a KILLER upper respiratory infection right now and was so zonked out on meds this weekend that I had to restart this chapter twice because it was not making sense. Hopefully we're good to go now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2019

Riley died on January 23rd, six days before her forty-second birthday.

Robby was at work when it happened, inhaling a granola bar after a grueling fifteen minutes in Trauma 1 trying to stabilize a GSW victim. Adamson approached him at the lockers, his face grave, and that was all it took for Robby to know. She had been in steady decline, speech beginning to slur, tremor growing worse, a once vibrant and sharp woman falling deeper and deeper into a void where she could no longer communicate properly despite the intelligent glint that remained in her blue eyes.

The day before, she'd felt better, and Robby recognized the sign, even if he desperately didn't want to admit what it meant. He had seen in Jack's eyes that he knew it, too, and when he'd left the Abbot home for work that morning he'd been filled with a sense of impending dread. Even as Adamson began to tell him, Robby found he could not hear him, a rush of blood leaving him near deaf as his vision tunneled. He leaned against the lockers, closing his eyes as Adamson continued, and thought of Jack.

It was as though a light switch had gone off behind Jack's eyes. When Robby got off work he headed straight over, the funeral home having already picked up Riley by the time he arrived, and Jack was sitting in a darkened living room, his head bowed and his shoulders hunched. Robby pictured the dream Riley had confided in him, a vision of Jack with a gun to his head, and walked over to the couch, resting a hand on the back of Jack's neck.

Jack didn't move until Robby sat down on the couch alongside him, still holding his neck, and then all he did was raise his left hand to grip Robby's. They sat like that for a few minutes, not speaking, and when Jack finally seemed to get the words together his voice was lacking its usual confidence, thick and hoarse in a way that clearly spoke to how much he'd been crying. "How can you have a year and a half to prepare for something like this and still feel like your heart has been scooped out at the end?"

"Because thinking about it isn't the same as living it," Robby said quietly. "Do you need me to say anything or do you just want me to sit with you?" Truthfully, he didn't know what he was supposed to do in this situation. He was good with patients, could be kind when there

was a separation between himself and the person he was comforting, but with someone he cared about it became so much more difficult.

Jack didn't answer; instead, he let go of Robby's hand and sat up, Robby letting his grip on the other man's neck fall away and resting his hand on the back of the couch instead. Jack looked at him and for the first time Robby realized he had gone almost completely grey since they'd first met. How much older did he look after all they had been through? "When's your next two days off?"

"Next weekend," Robby said. "It's the new semester so they've put me on weekdays for now."

"I have to ask you two favors," Jack said, such a melancholy in his words that Robby was almost scared. "First, can you stay the night?"

"Yeah," Robby said. "I brought a change of clothes and everything. He'd built up a small stock of clothes in the guest room as well, his overnight stays having become more frequent the more Riley grew sick. "I wasn't going to leave you tonight. What's the second favor?"

"They're going to cremate Riley." Jack sighed, running both hands back through his hair. "She asked for it and I like the idea of keeping her ashes, but I don't want to keep all of her here. Her parents had this cabin on Lake Erie and it's where we had our honeymoon. Will you drive up with me next weekend?"

Robby reached out, gripping Jack's shoulder hard and squeezing tightly. "Yeah. I don't think you should do it alone."

"I don't think I should, either," Jack said quietly. He got to his feet, turning to look down at Robby. "Did you eat?"

Robby studied him, able to see a dead quality in Jack's eyes that hadn't been there before. Robby had a good idea that Jack wanted to cry but wouldn't do it in front of him, and he didn't want to take that opportunity away from Jack; he also didn't want to leave him alone. He rubbed at his jaw, anxiety bubbling up in his stomach. In the end, he decided it was safer to stay in Jack's vicinity. "You want me to heat up those leftovers?"

"Thanks," Jack said, and Robby wanted to hug him. For some reason, however, that scared him, and he busied himself with heading into the kitchen and getting them dinner.

How he functioned for the next few days, Robby had no idea. It was as

though he was sinking into deeper and deeper water, working the days and then going over to Jack's house at night to make sure he ate. He was infinitely grateful for Janey, who worked near Jack's place and would swing by on her lunch breaks to check on him, infinitely grateful for Adamson and Dana and even his students, who were treating him with a lot more grace than Robby was accustomed to. Still, there was a weight on his shoulders he couldn't shake, and the one person he could have spoken to about it was the same person whose death was crushing him like a vice.

When Saturday morning finally came, Robby was at Jack's front door as soon as the sun was up, dressed in jeans, a sweater, and a lined jean jacket, a beanie pulled down over his dark hair to fend off the brutal cold. He didn't even have a chance to knock before the door opened, Jack standing there with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder and a small wooden box in his right hand. He was wearing black and for a moment Robby wondered if he should have done the same before Jack spoke, his voice soft. "You sure you're okay with driving? It's like three hours."

"It's fine," Robby said, holding out one hand to take the duffel bag from Jack. "I don't think you should be driving."

"You're probably right," Jack said, huffing out a laugh that was so close to defeated that it made Robby's heart hurt. "I'll buy us breakfast, at least."

There were few people on the planet who Robby could sit in silence with for an extended period of time and luckily Jack was one of them. They picked up breakfast before hitting the road but there wasn't much conversation to be had on the way there, Jack's grief so poignant that Robby really didn't think there was anything he could say to penetrate it. Jack dozed for most of the drive, the small wooden box in his lap the entire time, and Robby dutifully followed the GPS to Erie and then up the 5 towards New York. He found the Abbots's cottage easily, a small, rustic waterfront cabin that Jack had bought from Riley's parents when he'd left active duty.

Robby reached out to wake Jack up and found that his eyes were already open, his head resting against the window as he looked out at the cottage. "Was I asleep the whole time?"

"Uh, basically as soon as you finished breakfast," Robby said, turning off the car and reaching into the backseat to grab Jack's duffel bag. "Was it at least restful?"

“Yeah,” Jack said, dragging his hand down his face. “I had a dream for the first time since Riley died. It was–” He glanced at Robby, brow furrowed, and then shook his head. “Never mind. Do you want the grand tour?”

“If you’re up to it,” Robby said, soon finding himself in the cottage. It was one room, a kitchenette, a bed, a pullout sofa, and an ancient TV, but it was nice and Robby felt immediately as though he was at his grandma’s house, an abundance of quilts and strange little needlepoints making him right at home. “You had your honeymoon here?”

“It’s not exactly Niagara Falls,” Jack said, smiling. “Honestly, we were just happy to have an excuse to come up here without them. I can’t describe to you how awkward it was to sleep on a pullout sofa with Riley while her parents were asleep in that bed.”

Robby stared at him, unable to tell if he was joking or not, and as soon as he realized Jack was serious he grinned, covering his hand with his mouth. “Oh, man.”
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“Yeah,” Jack said. “And you know Riley. She was constantly trying to push the boundaries like her dad wasn’t looking for any reason to ship me back to Pittsburgh.” He sighed, setting the box containing Riley’s ashes down on the kitchenette counter and running his fingers over the wood. “I’d like to say my goodbyes at sunset, I think. Do you want to run into Erie? We can pick up some stuff for dinner and get lunch.”

They spent a day together that wasn’t too out of the norm considering all they’d been through in the last eighteen months. They picked up groceries for dinner and for breakfast the next day, ate a lunch of fish and chips on a freezing cold pier overlooking the lake, and wandered Erie’s small downtown as Jack pointed out places Riley had liked or businesses that had opened since the last time they’d been in town. It was easy to be alone together, even with their grief, and Robby wondered if he was providing at least some comfort to Jack.

When they got back to the cottage the sun was already sinking in the sky and Jack was noticeably subdued, grief creeping up on them again despite the relief they’d gotten earlier in the day. As soon as they got back into the cottage, Robby began to put away the groceries they’d picked up and Jack gravitated towards Riley’s ashes again, resting his palm against the top of the box. “I’m going to head down to the water,” he said, and when Robby looked at him he offered a miserable smile. “Don’t worry. I know you and Riley are all convinced I’m going

to throw myself in the lake but I won't put that on you, mostly because if there's anyone who can resuscitate me in time, it's probably you."

"Not funny," Robby said flatly, turning to look out the back window of the cottage towards the lake. "Will I be able to see you from here?"

"I won't go out of view, scout's honor," Jack said, lifting Riley's ashes before looking over at Robby again. "She left a note for you. It's in my duffel bag if you'd like to read it while I'm gone."

"Oh," Robby said, flustered; he had expected to be here for Jack's support, but he wasn't exactly surprised that Riley had left him something, however small. A note was nice, although he doubted there was much left for her to say to him or much closure to be gained. "That was nice of her."

"I'll see you in a bit and we can make dinner," Jack said, letting himself out the back door. Robby watched him walk down to the water before feeling as though he was intruding on what should have been a private moment and turning back to the cottage. He puttered around for a bit, tidying up and familiarizing himself with the kitchenette, ensuring they could actually make dinner with the hot plate and microwave, but finally realized he couldn't put things off any further.

He unzipped Jack's duffel bag and reached in, tugging out a small but weighty red envelope. It was sealed with a little Christmas sticker and Robby realized that she must have written it when she was sending out her Christmas cards, one of which was hanging on his fridge at home – a little Victorian frog caroling on a lily pad. He slid one finger underneath the seal and settled down on the sofa, the springs creaking uncomfortably as he did.

He wasn't surprised to find another weird little Victorian card, this one with a dead sparrow and the caption "May yours be a Joyful Christmas". It was macabre, considering the circumstances, but weirdly made him feel better, and he opened it to find both sides of the card filled out in Riley's careful handwriting, which had grown more spidery as she had gotten sicker.

Robby,

There really isn't too much I can say here that hasn't already been said to you in person. You're an exceptional friend and made a huge difference in my life, but I think you know that. Or, if you haven't learned it yet, you've

at least heard it a thousand times. All I want for you is happiness, and if you can find it with Jack eventually, I hope you do. Even if it isn't with Jack, I hope you find it somewhere.

All I can really say is thank you. I'm writing this at Christmas, obviously, but hopefully you don't have to read it for a while. Look after yourself.

Love,
Riley

PS: I hope you like my choice of card. It was between this and a weird little mouse on a lobster, but dead sparrow seemed more fun.

Robby finished reading the card and realized he was crying, closing his eyes and tilting his head back to try and get himself to stop. He wasn't ashamed of it, but he was a little concerned that Jack would return and find him crying which wouldn't do either of them any good. He re-read the card, finding that just seeing Riley's handwriting helped lessen the pain, and then got up to check the back window, the sunlight almost gone but Jack still visible down at the water.

A pang of longing struck Robby and he sighed, turning away from the window to start getting dinner ready. Despite Riley's tacit approval, Robby knew himself well enough to know that unless something drastic happened, he would never act on his feelings. It was an easy decision, Robby more comfortable forgoing his personal desires than was probably necessary, but he wasn't willing to give up Jack entirely. He was pretty confident in their ability to remain friends, to continue on the way they always had.

When Jack returned, he was holding the wooden box under one arm and was once again looking like a man who'd been crying, although he was dry-eyed now. Robby didn't ask and Jack didn't tell, the pair of them making grilled cheese and tomato soup for dinner which they ate on the pullout sofa while watching a battered VHS of Austin Powers that had definitely been in the cottage since 1997. They tossed a coin to divide up the beds and it was how Robby ended up with the futon, as creaky and uncomfortable as it was. He was so tired that he didn't think it would matter much anyway; after they'd tidied the kitchen and split a hot chocolate for dessert he figured he could even sleep on the floor without much trouble.

And he did sleep, at first.

It had to be after three in the morning when he woke up, lurching out of sleep like he'd been dreaming about falling or his name had been

called. The cottage was almost frighteningly dark aside from a beam of moonlight falling through the window and Robby lay there for a moment, disoriented, before he realized why he'd woken up. Jack was unmistakably crying, the deep hitching sort of breaths that overcame Robby sometimes when things just became too much, and Robby was briefly paralyzed by indecision. He didn't want to humiliate Jack, but he also didn't want to leave him to suffer.

He waited a few moments before stretching, the creak of the mattress undoubtedly alerting Jack, and then spoke, voice still sleep-muddled. "Jack? You awake?"

Jack drew in a slow, shaking breath. "What's up?"

"I'm freezing," Robby lied. "This is embarrassing, but, uh… can I maybe sleep with you?"

There was almost no hesitation in Jack's answer and something like relief in his voice. "Yes," he said, before possibly realizing he needed to temper it. "Sorry, that quilt isn't the thickest. It's probably better if you sleep over here."

"Thank you," Robby said, hauling the quilt up over his shoulder and sliding off the pullout sofa, walking back the ten feet or so to the queen-sized bed where Jack was. In the slight illumination provided by the moon he could see the other man, Jack sitting with his feet on the floor and looking up at Robby in the dark. Robby wondered how long he'd been crying alone and swallowed down how badly he wanted to fix it, instead throwing his quilt down at the foot of the bed and awkwardly kneeling on the opposite side of the mattress from Jack. "You're sure this is okay?"

"Yeah," Jack said, laying back on the bed and rolling so he was facing Robby. Robby wished he could see more than shadows, more than the outline of him, but he lay down too, careful to keep a foot or two between them even as he pulled the covers back to slip underneath. "It's cold tonight, especially on the lake."

Robby had barely settled his head on the pillow when Jack moved closer, his body heat pressing right up against Robby's bubble. "Are you all right?" Robby asked, trying to keep his voice measured.

"I'm sorry," Jack said quietly, and maybe it was easier for him because he and Robby couldn't see each other fully. "I'm going to ask you something and I don't want you to think less of me in the morning."

“Never,” Robby said, self-consciousness gripping him when he realized how quickly he’d spoken. “What do you need?”

“I just need to be held for a bit,” Jack said, voice cracking at the end, and he didn’t need to say another word. Robby reached out despite the dark and found Jack’s chest, sliding his arm around Jack to haul him closer. He wouldn’t mention it in the morning, would take it to his grave if he needed to, but he kept his hand on the small of Jack’s back as Jack pressed his face against Robby’s collarbone and allowed himself to cry.

Robby wasn’t sure how long they lay there before Jack’s breathing evened out and Robby realized he was asleep. He sighed, resting his forehead against Jack’s temple and aching so deep inside that it might have been easier to deal with a physical injury at this point. Robby knew damn well he was easily swayed by his own emotions, but where Jack was concerned he became hyperaware of everything he did, convinced that something would eventually give him away.

Despite this anxiety, the steady rhythm of Jack’s chest rising and falling against his own was enough to lull anyone to sleep. When Robby awoke in the morning it was to Jack still asleep in his arms, one of his legs slotted in between Robby’s, and Robby was so tempted to pretend he was still asleep that he almost did it before remembering that he was nearly fifty and couldn’t rely on those kinds of tricks anymore.

“Jack,” he murmured, rubbing Jack’s back slowly as he tried to wake him up. “Sun’s up.”

“Mm.” Jack rolled onto his back, stretching slowly, and then opened his eyes to look at Robby. Robby had been expecting regret or disgust there, some unidentifiable thing carrying over from the night, and when he saw only slight sleepiness and the usual sorrow he was stricken by a palpable relief. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Much warmer in this bed than the pullout couch,” Robby said, sitting up slowly. “Probably better for my back, too.”

“If we come back here, I won’t make you sleep there again,” Jack said, taking advantage of Robby sitting up to roll himself entirely in one of the quilts. “Can you put the coffee on?”

“Sure,” Robby said, laughing, and he had gotten out of the bed and padded over to the kitchenette before Jack spoke again.

“Robby,” he said, and Robby didn’t need to turn around to know that Jack was looking at him with the utmost sincerity. “Thanks for pretending you were cold.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Robby said, and if Jack noticed how red Robby’s neck and ears got, he kept it to himself.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry that stuff is popping off... I would say it will get better but 2020 is next and we all know what's happening there. However, we're also heading into SEASON TWO! So watch out because I'm about to go so crazy.

Chapter 7: 2020

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2020

Peds was filled with equipment, with noise, with Adamson.

Robby watched him die. Robby killed him with his gloved hands and then walked out into the ER and watched another dozen people die, all the ventilators in the world unable to keep the oxygen flowing. And among it all there were still the car accidents, the heart attacks, the construction mistakes. Bearing down on him like a vice, crushing him, the constant fucking grind eroding every sense of who he was and replacing it with an anxiety so piercing that at times he found himself unable to breathe and thought that maybe it was finally Covid, that he'd finally caught the virus he was desperately trying to fend off, only to realize that it was panic squeezing his lungs and not a virus after all.

Adamson was dead and Robby had spent the week following the murder of his mentor in a daze, working when he was supposed to and staying home when he was supposed to. He forgot the last time he'd eaten and couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken to someone outside of his coworkers, the entirety of the Pitt so swallowed up by the chaos the pandemic had wrought that none of them seemed wholly human anymore. Robby drank half a bottle of Scotch and fell into sleep so deep that it was thankfully dreamless, because when he dreamt lately it was of Adamson's chalky face surrounded by tubes and of those smiling fucking animals hovering around him and the beep of the ventilator and the bodies piling up all over the place and the knocking at the door.

Only there hadn't been anyone knocking at the door of Peds, had there? He had been alone when Adamson had died, when Robby had made the decision to pull the plug, and no one had interrupted. No one had called his name, either, and yet now there was someone yelling it from outside the room. Robby swam up through sleep, hazy and confused, and heard the hammer of a fist against the front door of his house, real and not dreamt at all. "Robby! Open up or I'll call the cops!"

Jack's voice. Still mostly drunk, Robby staggered to his feet, realizing belatedly that he was in only a pair of boxers and a hoodie but not caring at this point. He pulled a mask from a box on his kitchen

counter and headed for the front door, unlocking it; he had barely turned the knob when the door swung open and Jack forced his way inside. He wasn't wearing a mask and had on his military go bag, and there was a panic in his hazel eyes that Robby had never seen before. "Hold on," Robby said, but it was too late, Jack grabbing him in a hug so tight that it nearly crushed Robby's ribs.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Jack breathed out, pulling back just enough to look Robby in the eyes, searching his face closely before he hugged him again, Robby lifting his arms to hug him back. "You missed your shift today, man. I thought you were fucking dead."

"I missed my shift?" Robby asked, a chill going through him as he tried to think of what day it was, coming up blank. The day before had been Adamson's funeral, and he had been off the day after, unless… maybe Adamson's funeral had been two days before? His head was aching and he felt sick, panicky, gripping at the back of Jack's shirt. "What day is it?"

"It's the twelfth," Jack said, reaching up to unhook Robby's mask. "Dana and I covered for you, don't worry. Gloria was pissed but I think she knows how fucked up this whole thing has left you. How much have you had to drink?"

"A lot," Robby said truthfully. "You shouldn't take off my mask, Jack."

"Fuck that," Jack said vehemently. "You're my bubble now and I'm yours." He threw his bag down, dropping his forehead against Robby's shoulder and breathing out hard. "I thought you were dead. You have no idea what that did to me. I couldn't stop thinking… never mind. Jesus."

Robby was quiet, too drunk to truly process what was going on but not wanting to let go of Jack. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been touched, the pandemic having exposed just how few people he had outside of work and the high risk of getting sick meaning he needed to stay away from Janey and Jake, who were his usual support system. He dragged his hand down Jack's spine, the pair of them standing there in his open doorway for what felt like an eternity before Jack spoke again. "I'm moving in until this pandemic shit is over."

"Moving in?" Robby asked, pulling back slightly and nearly tilting over backwards until Jack caught him by the front of the hoodie. "Really?"

“I don’t think either of us should be alone,” Jack said. “You drank so much you forgot you had work, and I keep forgetting to eat. I’ve just been coming home and sleeping until my next shift.” He let go of Robby’s hoodie only to splay his fingers against Robby’s chest, his brow furrowed. “So much of my routine was based on you and since March that’s been fucked up.”

“Yeah,” Robby said, raising one hand to cover Jack’s, struck by such an intense surge of affection that he very nearly pulled Jack back into a hug. “Well, the guest room is yours. The place is a mess, though. I just–”

“I know,” Jack said, stepping into the house and pulling the door closed behind him. Robby didn’t think he’d seen Jack this concerned before, guilt twisting up in his chest as he recognized what he’d put him through. He couldn’t believe he’d lost track of his days, swallowed up by anxiety so deep and so profound that it was impossible to ignore, and after Adamson’s funeral, after the reality of the situation had sunk in, he’d hit the bottle hard. It was unlike him and yet he knew he’d been sinking into this melancholy for a while, grief and misery and an unshakable belief that all the work he did as a doctor was for naught combining to make him damn near unrecognizable when he looked in the mirror. “First thing’s first. Let’s get you feeling human again. When was the last time you showered?”

“Before the funeral,” Robby said, rubbing his mouth with his hand and following Jack as he headed deeper into the house. He wanted to say a dozen things, wanted to admit how badly he’d missed Jack since their paths crossed so infrequently in the bustle of the ER these days. Following Adamson’s illness Robby had found his anxiety spiking constantly, convinced that Jack would be next to get sick, that Robby would have to bury both Abbots within the course of two years. “I hate looking weak like this.”

“You don’t look weak,” Jack said. “And you’ve seen me at my worst. Come on.” Jack led him upstairs to the master bedroom and through to the ensuite, Robby realizing belatedly what was going on and stopping in the doorway. Jack turned to look at him, already rolling the sleeves of his t-shirt up, and raised his eyebrows. “What?”

“Are you going to, uh–” Robby asked, trailing off and nodding towards his soaker tub. “I can do it myself.”

“I know,” Jack said. “But I want to. When was the last time someone washed your hair for you?”

Robby stared at him, head swimming. He wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or Jack's offer – probably both, honestly – but he couldn't make sense of what was on offer here. The lines had been blurred since Riley's death, Robby half-convinced that Jack knew Robby was in love with him and half-convinced that Jack finding out would ruin their friendship forever, but this was different. This was strange, this was intimate, and if Robby hadn't drunk so much scotch an hour or so prior he would have stayed in the doorway and not toed the line between friends and more.

But he had drunk too much scotch, so he crossed the room to where Jack was standing and didn't protest when Jack took hold of the hem of his hoodie, pushing it up and over his stomach, his chest, his armpits. Robby swallowed hard and lifted his arms, Jack pulling it off all the way before setting it on the counter. His hands slid to the elastic waistband of Robby's boxers and Robby dropped his arms down, calloused fingers wrapping around Jack's wrists to stop him from undressing him further; even a good bit drunker than he normally got, this felt like too much.

"It's nothing I haven't seen before," Jack said. "You know how many guys I had to sober up when I was deployed?"

Of course. Robby let go of Jack's hands, tilting his head back to stare at the bathroom ceiling, embarrassment flooding over the back of his neck and up to the tips of his ears. It was genuinely incredible how quickly he could go from being convinced Jack was interested to being convinced that he was some kind of degenerate, mistaking a completely heterosexual activity for something homoerotic when Jack was just trying to be a good friend. They were both doctors, the naked body nothing more than so much meat at this point, and Robby had done the same thing when he'd been younger and had more friends. How many guys had he dumped in the shower after drunken nights out?

Jack helped Robby out of his boxers despite Robby not really needing help, balancing himself with one hand on Jack's shoulder and kind of thankful that he was drunk enough to not immediately get hard at the prospect of being nude in front of his best friend. Jack started the shower and Robby sunk into the tub underneath the stream of hot water, tilting his head back and watching as Jack came to perch on the end of the tub behind him. Jack rolled up his left pant leg and then his right, removing his prosthetic and setting it aside before swinging around so Robby was leaning in between his legs. "You comfortable?" he asked, putting his hands on either side of Robby's

head, his thumbs pressed gently against his temples. “Water’s okay?”

“It’s good,” Robby said, closing his eyes and sinking down slightly into the tub. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually taken a bath, normally just scrubbing down quickly and efficiently and never taking time to actually lounge. “I’m sorry, Jack.”

“Don’t be,” Jack said, running his fingers back through Robby’s dark hair and over the back of his neck, pushing his head forward so it was underneath the shower. His touch was surprisingly soft, his thumbs pushing against his skin gently as he wet Robby’s hair. “You got so lucky today, though. Dana realized you weren’t there and called me right away. We managed to convince Gloria that you and I switched shifts and just forgot to tell her.”

“You worked my whole shift?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Ellis agreed to take mine tonight, thank god.”

Robby kept his eyes closed, afraid of how he was feeling even as Jack began to methodically wash his hair, the touch so foreign that Robby practically felt like he was melting. “I don’t think anyone has ever washed my hair,” he admitted. “Or at least not since I gained consciousness.”

“That’s probably the absolute weirdest way you could have worded that,” Jack said. “Riley used to do mine when I’d had a bad day.” He paused, sliding his fingers down over the sides of Robby’s neck before gently pushing his index fingers underneath Robby’s jaw. “Tilt your head back.”

Robby did as he was told, blinking back the water as he opened his eyes to look at Jack. Jack was looking down at him, his expression grim, and Robby resisted the urge to reach up and take his face in both hands. “Don’t kill yourself,” he said bluntly. “Actually, don’t die at all. I can’t handle it right now.”

“I’m not going to kill myself,” Robby said. “I just… I keep having these nightmares. About Adamson, about you. And I feel like I killed him. Like there was more I could have done, like I could have left him on life support for longer or something. I can’t sleep without seeing it and it’s making it so I can’t sleep at all unless I drink. I know it's not good, you know? I know I should stop myself, but the idea of trying to go at this sober is too much.”

“Well, I’m here, so you don’t need to have nightmares about me,” Jack

said, smoothing Robby's hair back off his forehead. "Riley told you to look after me, didn't she?"

"Of course she did," Robby said.

"She told me to look after you, too, so let's do that. We can make sure that we're not drinking ourselves into a coma or whatever the hell we'd do separately." Jack dropped his hands to Robby's shoulders, smacking him twice briefly before twisting around so he could put his prosthetic back on. "Do you feel human yet?"

"I feel better for sure," Robby said, hauling himself to his feet. "I can take it from here. Want to order dinner while I'm finishing up?"

"On it," Jack said, getting up as well and drying his foot off on the bath mat. "See you downstairs, man. I'm throwing out the last of that scotch."

It was as simple as that, strangely. Robby, who hadn't lived with another man since he'd become a full-fledged doctor, suddenly found himself with a roommate. He and Jack had spent so much time together that living together really wasn't that big of a change, and having someone in his bubble made all the difference even if he and Jack were run off their feet with work. They settled into a simple routine, Robby cooking Jack breakfast before he left for work and coming home to a hot dinner each night that Jack had made him, and despite how crushing the world had become since the pandemic had begun Robby no longer felt like he might succumb at any minute.

The pain of losing Adamson didn't fade but he did think about it less, and as September waned and autumn arrived in Pittsburgh Robby realized just what sort of domesticity he had fallen into. There wasn't much he and Jack could do outside of the house, the pandemic still raging even as things began to open back up and neither of them wanting to risk it, so whenever they had an overlapping day off they normally spent it meal prepping or working on a puzzle that Jack didn't have the patience for and Robby couldn't really make out because he was still in denial about his reading glasses.

Needless to say there hadn't been too much progress made and yet Robby felt sometimes like he was light years ahead of where he'd been just a few months prior. He still awoke sometimes in a sheer panic, still felt that gripping vice of anxiety that crushed his lungs, but instead of happening every day it was happening every other day, and to him that seemed like progress.

It was late October and they'd given up on working on the puzzle for the night, Robby lounging on the floor with his back against the couch as he nursed a beer, Jack curled up under a blanket right behind Robby's head. Whatever was on TV was unimportant, some travel show with a moderately soothing host, and Robby wasn't thinking about much when Jack spoke. "I'm thinking about putting the house up for rent."

Robby turned his head so he could look at Jack, able to see him just out of his periphery. Jack wasn't looking at him, his head on the arm of the couch, but Robby could tell he had said it to gauge Robby's reaction. "You think I want you living here forever?" he asked, looking back at the TV and taking a sip of his beer to try and cover up a smile. "I feel like you're supposed to ask the person you're living with before you just move in all the way."

"This is me asking," Jack said. "Sorry, let me rephrase it. Do you think I should put my house up for rent?"

Robby twisted around now, looking Jack in the eyes. "What happens when the lockdown is done and you're sick of living here?"

"Is that gonna happen?" Jack asked. "I told you when I moved in that I didn't think we should live alone. I kind of thought that was obvious, but…"

Robby studied him, part of him pleased that Jack wanted to stay and part of him concerned that he only wanted it because he hadn't spent much time living alone at all. "Jack," he said seriously. "Do you actually want to live here? If you rent your place, you're stuck with me for at least another year."

"Do you not like living with me?" Jack asked. "I… man, I really didn't think I read the room this wrong."

"That's not the problem," Robby said. He'd gotten too complacent, he realized. He'd become used to Jack's presence and had forgotten how it felt to not have him around, had forgotten that they were on completely different pages in terms of their feelings for one another. Jack saw Robby as his support system and Robby, in his endless pining, saw Jack as more. He couldn't let Jack just move in like this, not when Robby felt almost predatory. He'd been struggling with it for years now, this feeling like he was in the wrong, and even Riley's reassurance, even his own soul-searching, couldn't seem to undo the guilt and shame that welled up when faced with his feelings for Jack.

Robby sighed, tilting his head forward to rest his cheek against the edge of the couch cushion, Jack still looking down at him. There was nothing in his face to indicate that he knew, and that was almost worse than anything else. “If you’re serious about staying awhile, I need to tell you something.”

“What, are you a serial killer?” Jack asked, freeing a hand from underneath the blanket to reach past Robby and grab his own beer off the coffee table. “I guess that’s not so bad. You make decent pancakes, so I can probably forgive you.”

“Come on, take it seriously,” Robby said, reaching up to grab Jack’s bicep and stop him from pulling his arm back. They looked at each other and Robby realized he could smell Jack, the faint scent of some cologne he knew Riley had gotten Jack a few Christmases ago. His stomach twisted up but he ignored it, keeping his dark eyes on Jack’s paler ones. “I should have told you before, but I didn’t want you to think I was trying to lie to you or anything.”

Jack looked at him, his expression having taken on a grim slant. “Robby, you don’t need to tell me anything. There’s nothing that’s going to change my mind about living with you.”

“I have to say it though,” Robby said. “I can’t just keep pretending. Riley knew, you know? And you should have known, too, but I was a coward, and–”

“Michael,” Jack said sharply, and the use of his first name made Robby’s stomach hurt. “I’m telling you that you don’t need to say it. You shouldn’t say it, whatever it is you’re going to say, because whatever it is isn’t something I can reciprocate.”

Robby’s entire body went numb and he dropped his hand from Jack’s arm, swallowing hard despite how dry his mouth had gone. Jack knew, Jack had seemingly known for a while, and yet… of course he didn’t reciprocate. He’d kept it quiet either out of concern for Robby or an inability on his end to be alone and the pain that this realization elicited in Robby’s chest would have been startling if he didn’t recognize it for what it was.

He grabbed the arm of the couch and got to his feet, head swimming. “I think I’m drunk,” he said, the only lie he could come up with despite both of them knowing he’d only had two beers. “I’m going to head to bed.”

“Robby,” Jack said, pushing himself into a sitting position and looking

up at Robby. There wasn't a lick of cruelty in his face and that was what made this worse; Robby was fifty fucking years old and yet he felt like a schoolboy who'd just embarrassed himself in front of a crush. "I'm sorry. It's just easier this way."

"For who?" Robby asked before he could stop himself, dragging his hand over his mouth. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I know. Just, uh… let's forget this happened, okay? I'll see you tomorrow. I didn't say it, so we're okay."

"Okay," Jack said, but Robby knew full well that even though he hadn't said the words he'd done irreparable damage to Jack, or Jack had done irreparable damage to him. Either way, it certainly wasn't okay.

Chapter End Notes

> I am so sorry :(but it's Pitt week at least!!!! And don't worry... more Rabbot is on its way. (Also more Hucklerobby and Hucklerabbot if that's what you're into, and some Mohan/Mel if I can muster up the inspiration to finish the WIP I've got sitting on my drive). Enjoy, as always!

Chapter 8: 2021

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2021

“Uh… the foreign object in North 4,” Robby said, peering up at the monitor, his glasses hanging around his neck ineffectively as he read the information. “Herrera, you and Slater take that one. Any information, Dana?”

“Little girl dared her brother to put a dime up his nose,” Dana said, looking at him from over her computer, exasperation clear. “Kids are a little hysterical, but the extraction should be easy enough to handle.”

“Classic,” Robby said, looking over at his residents. “I stuck a ball of tin foil up my nose when I was a kid. Could still be in there.”

“Would explain a lot if it was,” Dana chirped, Robby laughing before waving his residents towards North 4 and walking around to his computer. “You doing okay?”

“Me?” Robby asked, putting his glasses on so he could peer down at the chart he’d been working on before his students had come looking for more work, still green enough that they needed a little bit of handholding. July was always a bit of a toss-up, a few new students trickling in and a few older ones trickling out, and Robby found that it was either one of the most intensive times for teaching or one of the least. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Dana snorted through her nose, a clear sign that she thought Robby was full of shit. “You’ve got a weird tell,” she said, looking at him. “You get this funny look around your eyes when you’re starting to get stressed out and you’ve had it for a couple months now.”

Robby looked at her, about to repeat that he was fine when he was pre-emptively interrupted. “Hey, fruitcake. Do you have a minute to take me outside for a cigarette?”

Robby sighed, turning his head and keeping his hands braced on his computer desk as he peered down at Myrna. She’d come in the night before and was now mostly sober, although they were playing the classic game of trying to keep her out of people’s hair while also keeping her out of jail. “I do not,” he said, turning back to his chart. “But if you give me a couple of minutes, I can take you to get a coffee.”

Myrna groaned, jangling her hand against the arm of the wheelchair where it was cuffed. “Come on, don’t be such a pussy. One cigarette won’t kill me.”

Robby breathed out through his nose, doing his best to keep himself from sniping back at her since he knew full well that was what she wanted. “Myrna, I really don’t like when you call me those names. I don’t think pussy is appropriate and calling me fruitcake because I have seen more than enough of your vagina is–”

“That’s not why I call you fruitcake,” she said, and Robby raised his gaze to look at Dana, sure that Myrna was about to say something so over-the-top offensive that neither of them would be able to keep their composure. “I call you fruitcake because of the bedroom eyes you get whenever that night shift doctor is around.”

Dana raised her eyebrows at Robby and he felt himself blush, heat flooding up and over his face. “Okay, that’s quite enough,” Robby said, locking the computer and turning to grab Myrna’s wheelchair by the handles. “Let’s go get you some breakfast.”

Taking Myrna to get a sandwich turned into being roped into the dime extraction turned into a trauma call, and by the time Robby could even think about taking a break two more hours had passed. He let one of the senior residents know that he was heading out to the ambulance bay, stepping out into the fresh air and groaning as he stretched his arms above his head, his spine cracking.

“Robby.”

“Fuck,” Robby mumbled, turning around to find Dana standing at the side of the ambulance bay, a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth as she fumbled with a lighter. “Oh, thank god. I thought someone was going to ask me something.”

“Oh, I’m gonna ask you something. C’mere.”

Robby walked over obediently, resting his back against the bricks and looking down at her. “As long as it’s not medical, you can ask me whatever the hell you want.”

Dana chuckled, lighting her cigarette and taking a drag before speaking. “Was Myrna right?”

“Okay, I guess I should have expected that,” Robby said, sighing. “In my defense, I didn’t realize I was doing it.”

“Told you this morning your eyes are too expressive,” she said, tapping her temple. “And you know Myrna. If she thinks she can hurt your feelings, she’s gonna try. So come on, what’s going on?”

“He knows,” Robby said, tilting his head back. “Or, I guess… I don’t know. When he moved in during lockdown, I tried to tell him but he stopped me. We never mentioned it again and we’ve just kept going but it’s eating me up, and I guess maybe I do look at him like that. At this point, I think that’s just the way it has to be.”

“Doesn’t seem fair,” Dana said. “What, he gets all the benefits of a boyfriend without a label?”

“Not *all* the benefits,” Robby said, and Dana laughed. “But it’s not like that. I don’t know. It’s always felt like that with Jack. Or it has for the last several years. And before Riley died, I kind of thought… I don’t know. I got this feeling that she might have been encouraging it. She definitely knew how I felt, and I got this sense that Jack liked it, but… it might have been safer for him to like me when there was someone in the middle.” He huffed, looking at her again. “I think it’s one of the only times in my life where I don’t know what it is I’m supposed to do.”

“I mean, I’d be telling him,” Dana said, shrugging. “If he doesn’t like it, that’s fine, but he can’t tell you to keep it all to yourself.” She crushed her cigarette against the bricks behind them, pushing herself away and looking up at him. “Besides, he’s an idiot. I bet you if men were more willing to admit when they had crushes the world would be a better place.” She grinned. “You know, before I met Benji I was quite the Sappho.”

“Oh, I believe it,” Robby said, laughing. It felt kind of good to tell Dana about Jack; now someone else alive knew what he was bearing. He moved to go inside with her, an ambulance pulling up as they did, and there was more than enough to keep him occupied for the rest of the shift, his body physically there but the entirety of his concentration on Jack. Robby knew full well that he tamped things down, covered up anything that was hurting him so he wouldn’t disturb others. He’d done it as a kid when he’d wanted to avoid upsetting his grandmother, who’d already been through so much, and he did it as an adult to avoid putting his own pain onto others.

Jack, though… They had spent the last ten months in continued symbiosis. Nothing had changed after the night when Robby had tried to confess except that now Robby’s shame sat like a bolus in his chest,

pressing up against his heart at any given moment. He was embarrassed that he had said anything so he just swallowed it down, but Dana was right, and there was no doubt in his mind that if he didn't say something to Jack Myrna would the next time she was brought in on night shift's watch.

By the time seven rolled around he was tired but resolute, finishing up going over a cryptic pregnancy with Herrera when he spotted Jack walking in. He handed the chart to his student and nodded. "Finish charting and I'll take a look in the morning, okay? I've got full confidence in you." He ducked past Herrera and headed towards Jack, raising a hand. "You got a few minutes before you clock in?"

"Of course," Jack said, hoisting his backpack further on one shoulder. "Roof? No one goes up there."

"Sure," Robby said, looking towards the elevator. "Get situated. I'll meet you up there."

Jack looked at him, studying his face, and Robby could see in his eyes that he knew what was coming. To Jack's credit, however, he didn't flinch away. "Got it," he said. "I'll see you up there, Robby."

Dana had been right, like she usually was. Robby had been running from this but at the end of the day it wasn't his fault he'd fallen in love with Jack any more than it was Jack's fault that he didn't love Robby back. Living with him, seeing him every day, allowing their lives to become entwined to the point where even their finances were mostly intermingled… Robby had fucked up allowing things to get to this point.

He reached the roof and headed out, resting his forearms against the railing and looking out at the city he'd come to love. He wasn't there long before Jack came up beside him, resting his arms against the railing as well. "Why?" he asked, and Robby stared down at the street, watching people walk past like ants. The depth at which Jack knew him, the bond they had, was so exceptionally deep that Robby wondered sometimes if he was greedy for wanting love in return.

"Dana found out," Robby said, dropping his forehead against his fists. "And I'm sorry. I tried to keep it to myself as long as I could."

"Robby," Jack said quietly. "I shouldn't have put you in that position to begin with. I'm sorry, man. I am."

"I'm the one who started it." He huffed, keeping his head down. "Who

the fuck falls in love with a guy because he's nice? I'm not a child, and yet that's exactly what I did."

"Last year, I shouldn't have told you not to tell me. I knew. I mean, I've known for a while. Riley and I used to talk about it just in passing, just… because we felt so comfortable with you." Robby turned his head to one side to look at Jack, finding that he was staring out at the city as well. "When that nurse made that throuple joke, it shook me up. I thought maybe there was something we were doing that was making it seem like you were with us, and it freaked me the fuck out. I brought it up to you to see how you would react, if you might have acted on it, but… Sometimes I think maybe if Riley hadn't gotten sick, if we'd had more time, things would have been different."

"I loved Riley but not the way I love you," Robby said adamantly, the words so foreign on his tongue that he was almost embarrassed to say them out loud even though he'd been dying to do just that for years. "I think she knew before I did, honestly, but it's getting worse now that we're living together."

Jack reached out, gripping the back of Robby's neck, and they stood there for a few moments in total silence. "I can't," Jack said quietly. "It was selfish of me to tell you to keep it to yourself, but I can't, Robby. I've thought about it, I swear I have, but there's no future there."

Robby frowned, looking over at him. "No future?"

"What?" Jack asked, frowning in return, his fingers still on Robby's nape. "Do you seriously see us getting married, settling down?"

"That's not the only future people have," Robby said. "We're already living together." He shrugged off Jack's touch, straightening up and looking at him. "I wasn't expecting you to reciprocate, Jack. You don't need to apologise for not loving me. Maybe you're right, anyway. Maybe if Riley was alive we'd have had a chance, but she's not and by your own admission, we don't. I don't want you to move out, but I also just think maybe it's best if we keep things separate for a bit. It might be good for me to have that space."

Jack looked at him, and there was something in his eyes that made Robby think that he was on the cusp of saying more. It was something haunted, something animal, and Robby didn't know what to do with a look like that, because it wasn't the look of someone who'd just been told that their best friend was in love with them. Robby fiddled with

his stethoscope, looking down at the man who'd been his friend longer than anyone else he could remember, who knew him better than anyone else he'd ever known. "What?"

"You have no idea how badly I wish I could love you," Jack said, turning away again, his hands laced behind his head, fingers digging into his hair, so grey now after being so dark when they'd first met. "That night when you told me, when you said it just now… I wish I could say it back. You've made such a difference in my life, man. With Riley, with living together… I just–"

"I'm not going to stop being friends with you because there's no romance here," Robby said. "Just means I need to bark up another tree." And okay, maybe the tree was different than when he'd last been in the dating scene, and maybe undoing the love he'd had for this specific tree for such a long time was going to be extraordinarily difficult, but still. Robby had agonized over this love, had confessed this love, and had recognized that Jack was right. There was no future there, not because the relationship was doomed from the start but because Jack simply didn't love him back.

But that didn't explain why the hell Jack was looking at him like that or why Robby got the feeling that there was so much more that was simply unsaid. Part of him wanted to push further, try harder, but he didn't want to shove Jack over the edge or make him think that Robby couldn't take no for an answer. "I'll leave a plate in the oven like usual," he said, flexing his fingers around the rubber of his stethoscope to remind himself to keep his hands to himself. "See you tomorrow."

"You got it," Jack said, but he didn't turn to see Robby off, didn't move at all from where he was leaning against the railing, and Robby looked at him for a minute or two longer before heading back to the elevator and leaving the Pitt. It hadn't been a huge confession, a weight off his shoulders. If anything, Robby felt mostly the same, only more drained than usual. He had never expected Jack to love him back, and he had hoped that this conversation would have put his expectations to bed, but it hadn't done that at all.

Robby could see that look in his eyes, clear as day, and despite having spent his entire adult life training himself to recognize the human condition he couldn't parse out the emotion that had been there. He gathered his things, formally handed everything over, and then headed out, standing on the sidewalk in front of the hospital and looking at the summer sky, still blue despite how late it was. He knew

full well that Jack would have made him dinner, that it would be sitting in the oven at home with tin foil tented over it, but he didn't want to be alone right now.

It seemed like melancholy would creep up and swallow him if he allowed it, and there was an easy way to not allow it. He sighed and headed down the sidewalk, not in the direction of home but in the direction of the closest bar, frequented by hospital staff, students from the nearby medical school, and a good mix of locals. It was where he'd met Janey and where he'd had infrequent hookups before that, but tonight all he really wanted was to go somewhere where the noise of a crowd would overtake the noise of his thoughts.

The bar wasn't overly busy, booths open that would allow Robby to mope without having to really interact with anyone, and he took one in the furthest corner from the door, the light above it flickering every time he moved a certain way. It didn't matter, though, and he ordered a beer and a side of fries, not wanting to spoil his dinner but also not feeling up to going hungry for much longer.

He had hoped that this would be an end, that it would provide closure. That he would say his piece, that Jack would turn him down, that Robby would be upset and heartbroken but that he'd be able to figure it out. Instead he just felt the same as he always had. Maybe that spoke to some defect in him, some burnt out part of his machinery that had gotten worse since he'd lost Adamson, but he wasn't convinced. Jack's eyes, his words, his admission that he and Riley had talked about *more*…

The waitress brought his order and Robby half-heartedly ate a fry, finding his phone among the things he'd stuffed into his backpack and unlocking it to look at any messages he'd received. Nothing except a reminder he'd set on his calendar to pay the mortgage, and he put on his reading glasses to make sure he did just that when he realized someone was standing next to his booth. Expecting a nurse, a doctor, even an admin, Robby set his phone down and looked up. "Oh," he said, startled when it wasn't any of the above. "Sorry, can I help you?"

The woman standing next to the booth was tall, slim, and dark-skinned, her hair close-shaven and making her features even more striking. Robby honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd seen anyone so starkly beautiful, and when she smiled at him it was bright and very obviously flirtatious. "I didn't mean to interrupt," she said. "But you dropped your water bottle when you came in and it rolled under my table."

Robby checked the mesh pocket at the side of his backpack and found that it was empty, looking at the woman as she set the steel bottle on the edge of his table. “Shit,” he said, huffing out a strained laugh. “Looks like there’s a hole in my backpack. Thanks for bringing it over.”

“Of course,” she said, looking over her shoulder; Robby saw that ‘her table’ consisted of a handful of other women, all clearly egging the woman on. Robby wondered if they’d dared her to do it. He didn’t think the stranger was too much younger than him, maybe in her late thirties, and it was kind of endearing to think that she’d needed encouragement to come talk to him. Then again, he’d been told several times he didn’t exactly come off as approachable. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“Oh, no, I just got off work,” Robby said. “Just having a drink. Did you want to sit?”

She slid into the booth, Robby unable to stop himself from smiling at her boldness. “You’re a doctor?”

“I’m an attending over at PTMC,” Robby said, nodding in the vague direction of the hospital and watching her raise her eyebrows. “Oh no. What?”

“I’m an M4,” she said. “Do you want me to go?”

“An M4,” Robby repeated, laughing. “Didn’t expect that. No offense, you seem–”

“Older?”

“More mature,” Robby said patiently. “Where are you doing your placement?”

“I’m over in maternity at Presby right now,” she said. “But I applied to do a residency at the ER at PTMC starting in September.”

It was Robby’s turn to raise his eyebrows. “I hear the attending there is a real dickhead.”

“Is that so?” she asked. “I guess I’ll have to find out in September.” She smiled at him and Robby knew that she was bright enough to have realized who he was but smart enough to keep that to herself. “Do you want another beer?”

“Sure,” Robby said, finishing off the one he’d already been drinking. “I’m Robby, by the way.”

“Heather,” she said, reaching across the table to grip his hand briefly, and for the first time since he’d realized how he felt about Jack he felt some sense of normalcy.

Chapter End Notes

> No Heather hate please! I love her to death and it's obvious from last season that she and Robby had a big impact on one another -- she's also vital to the plot I have planned. I feel like pre-Robby and pre-The Pitt she was definitely a more open person but, just like Robby and Jack since the beginning of this fic, a toll will be taken. We are almost to the end now! 4 chapters left after this :(

Chapter 9: 2022

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2022

“I matched.”

Robby looked up from where he was leaning against his headboard, peering at Heather over his glasses. She was sitting cross-legged next to him, her laptop perched precariously on her bare knees, and Robby was momentarily distracted by the sight of her in one of his t-shirts before realizing that now was not the time. “You did?”

“It just came through,” she said. “I’m scared to open it.” She looked at him, dark eyes apprehensive. “What if I get the Pitt?”

“Isn’t that what you want?” Robby asked, setting his well-loved copy of Jurassic Park on the nightstand and rolling on his side to look at her. It felt like a lifetime since the year prior, since Jack had turned him down on the roof and he’d met Heather. He hadn’t been surprised when Jack had moved out, when a wall that hadn’t been there for years erected itself between them. It had been what he’d expected, after all. They were still friendly enough at work, but they weren’t the same, and Dana hadn’t asked him about it again. That it had been twelve months was shocking; that in those twelve months Robby had developed a decent relationship with Heather even more so.

He liked her. She was pretty and she was smart and she was funny, but Robby had known almost from the first that there was an end date to the relationship. He didn’t love her, not the way he thought she wanted him to, and he knew it was because of that nagging worm in the back of his skull that could not stop loving Jack. He looked at her sometimes and wished he could put that part of himself to bed, just be happy with what he had, but then he would have a five-minute handover conversation with Jack at work and those feelings for him would swell up, curdled and sour, in his stomach once again.

She reached out and ran her fingers back through his dark hair, pressing her thumb briefly against his forehead. “I want to be at the Pitt because it’s good for my career,” she said. “But you know it means that this whole thing with us has to end.”

Robby sighed, pulling his glasses off and letting his head fall back on the pillow. “I know you keep saying that, but I think we’re both mature enough to keep our work and personal lives separate if we wanted to. We came into this knowing full well that there was a

possibility you'd be matched there." She quirked an eyebrow, almost imperceptible if he hadn't spent the last year looking at her almost every day, and he quirked an eyebrow back. "What?"

"That works for you," she said. "You're the attending. If you're sleeping with a resident, then you get a slap on the wrist and all the men at the hospital look at you like you're something to be admired. If I'm sleeping with an attending, though, then for the rest of my career I'm the woman who slept her way to the top and not a doctor who can stand on her own two feet. I like you, Robby, but not enough to risk my reputation."

Robby knew that the proper reaction was to be upset or disappointed – hell, even angry. Any of those would have been better than the strange relief that washed over him, the sort that came after ignoring a toothache for too long and finally acknowledging the pain. The thought that she wasn't in love with him was both freeing and a little embarrassing, because of course she wasn't. Robby had proven himself unlovable time and time again, and a woman like Heather was so far out of his league that he should have expected this much. "You think people will judge you for dating me?"

"They absolutely will," Heather said. She put up her hand, looking down at him. "One, you're older than me." She put a finger up. "Two, you're white." Another finger. "Three, you're an attending." A third finger. "That's three strikes against people thinking you're with me for the 'right reasons'." She dropped her hand, tapping it gently against her laptop. "Maybe it won't be the Pitt and this conversation won't mean anything, but…"

"But you're the smartest person I've ever met and the likelihood of you not getting your top choice is slim," Robby said, rolling closer to her so he could lay her head on her thigh. "Okay, I'm ready. See where you matched and we'll cross the bridge together." He watched as she opened the email she'd received, the pair of them exhaling in unison as they read the hospital. "Welp," he said, kissing the skin just above her knee. "Guess we're breaking up come September."

"You can sound a little more disappointed," she said, but there was a note of joy in her voice that told Robby that she was much happier with this outcome than she would have been with another match. She carded her fingers through his hair, pausing to rub the top of his earlobe gently. "Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

"Heather," Robby said, closing his eyes and breathing out softly

against her skin. “I’m way happier that you got a residency you’re actually going to like than I am upset we can’t keep this going. I think we kind of knew going into this that it wasn’t permanent.”

“I think you’re right,” she said, sitting quietly for a few moments more before bending over to kiss him on the temple. “Where are we going to celebrate?”

“Oh, I knew it,” Robby said, laughing. “You just want my money.”

“Guilty,” Heather said, setting her laptop aside so she could flop down on top of him. “We have two months left, so you better make the most of it.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her on the throat, and almost unwillingly thought of Jack. If he hadn’t met Heather in that bar, if he hadn’t agreed to buy her a drink, if one thing hadn’t led to another… would he have spent that night in a drunken haze, fixated on Jack and only Jack, on his outright rejection? Not just his rejection but what seemed like an abject refusal to love Robby, despite clearly entertaining it. He knew it was unfair to Heather to be thinking about this, but it seemed like every quiet moment was underwritten with the thought of Jack.

“You know the attending at the Pitt is a real dickhead,” Robby said. “You’re gonna have a shitty time of it.”

“Ah, I’m used to putting men in their places,” she said, smiling at him. “Do you want me to show you?”

“Yes, please,” he said, rolling over so he could pin her to the bed.

—

Robby pulled his beanie down over his ears, the Pittsburgh cold starting to creep up on him as October settled over the city. It had been nearly two months since he and Heather had called things off so she could start at the Pitt with no danger of favoritism hanging over her head, except… well, if he occasionally texted her, and if she occasionally appeared at his house, that was to be expected. Tonight was one such occasion; they’d left work separately, but Robby was waiting out front for her, curled up on one of his front porch chairs as he watched traffic go by and nursed a beer.

This was better for both of them in the long run. No expectations meant no one would get hurt, and Robby could keep the misery that

always seemed hellbent on consuming him at bay. He had been struggling with loneliness for months now, even with Heather, and he knew it all came back to Jack. He missed him. They saw each other at work but it was nothing like it had been; there was no falling asleep on the couch together, no dinner every other night, no living together or even much texting. It was as if Robby's confession had undone the years of friendship they'd built, and Robby would have believed that Jack didn't love him if he didn't occasionally catch a look in his eyes that seemed to say the opposite.

"Robby."

And now he was hallucinating Jack's voice. Robby sat up a little further in his chair and glanced down the front path of his house, Jack standing at the gate. A thrill shot through Robby, both because he was there and because Heather was on her way, and he stared at the other man for a few moments before realizing he hadn't said anything. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

"Sorry," Jack said. "I texted you but I guess you didn't get it."

"I left my phone inside to charge," Robby said, pulse racing. "Is everything okay?"

"I need to talk to you," Jack said, still hovering by the gate. "Can I come up?"

Another sign of their disconnect; previously, Jack never would have asked if he could sit with Robby. He would have just walked into the house. Robby took a sip of his beer just so he had something to do with his hands and looked at Jack intently. "Sure."

Jack closed the gate behind him and walked over; in a paint-stained army hoodie and a pair of torn jeans, he looked less put together than Robby did at the moment and that was saying a lot. He dragged one of the porch chairs closer to Robby, setting it up so he would be sitting directly across from him, and sat down, resting his elbows on his knees and lacing his hands together. "Look at me."

Robby did as he was told, meeting Jack's gaze, and despite his nerves, despite his knowledge that Heather would be there any minute, comfort washed over him almost like he had been submerged in a warm ocean wave. It was how he had known, maybe. Jack was the only person who made him feel so content, so relieved, so at home, that even weighed down by this uncertainty he was unable to refuse him. "What's going on?"

“I started therapy a couple months ago,” Jack began. “I was going for a while before Riley died but I just… I stopped. I thought there wasn’t a point anymore, you know? I just didn’t care. But I was driving home one day and I was thinking how easy it would be to drive into a fucking tree and I realized that I shouldn’t be thinking that. So I started up again, and I…” He swallowed hard, dropping his gaze from Robby’s face. “This shouldn’t be so fucking hard.”

“Jack…” Robby said quietly, wanting to reach out and grip his hand but not knowing where they stood.

“I know. I’m sorry. Anyway, I… I’ve been trying to give you space, man. I’ve been trying to back off so you don’t feel like you have to hurt to be around me. And that might sound like bullshit, it might sound like I’m just being an asshole, but this distance I’ve created is tearing me up and I thought it would get easier but it didn’t. I miss you. That’s the plain truth. I have spent every single day since last summer thinking about how much I miss you. I probably wouldn’t be sitting here telling you any of this, but something happened at work last night and I realized how fucking stupid I was being.”

“Wait, wait,” Robby said, getting to his feet. “I’m gonna grab you a beer.”

Jack laughed without much humor in it but didn’t stop him, Robby heading inside, head swimming. He was scared of what Jack was about to tell him but also exhilarated, certain that they were on the brink of something. Whether it was Jack finally removing the splinter from his heart by telling him once and for all that he wasn’t interested, that it wasn’t a matter of not being able to love him but a matter of actually not loving him, or if it was – a stupid, hopeful voice in the back of Robby’s head – a confirmation of what Robby had suspected all along, it was coming to a head tonight.

He grabbed a beer from the fridge and thought about checking his phone to see what Jack had actually sent him but decided against it, walking back outside after popping the cap off the drink and finding Jack doubled over with his forehead pressed against his clenched fists. “You okay?”

“No, not really,” Jack said, sitting up and taking the beer from Robby, looking relieved. “We had a suicide yesterday. A gunshot wound to the head with a service weapon. He served when I served. He was thirty miles away from me in Afghanistan, but we never met until he came into the ED with his brain hanging out of his skull. I was looking

at him and I was thinking about how close I had come to being him and I…"

He was crying, tears dripping silently down his face, but Robby didn't interrupt; instead, he finally took the plunge, reaching out and resting his hand over Jack's wrist. Jack turned his hand upwards to grip Robby's hand in return. "When I was deployed the first time, I was really struggling. I was away from Riley for the first time and I was scared and I didn't want to hurt anyone. I joined to keep our guys safe, not to kill people, and I thought for the longest time I'd made a horrible fucking mistake."

He pulled Robby's hand up towards him, pressing it against his forehead, and the touch sent a thrill through Robby. He knew he wasn't touch-starved the way he had once been and yet he felt as though he had been dying to feel Jack's skin on his own for months now. "There was this other medic, Daniel. I got close to him, really close. I felt about him the way I feel about you, Robby." He looked at Robby again, an intensity in his eyes that was so fierce that it almost burned. "When that IED went off, the one that took my leg, it took Daniel, too. Looking down at that guy last night…"

Robby let him talk, just listened, his hand gripping Jack's so tightly he was worried he might break it. Some nagging voice in the back of his skull was telling him that Heather would be there any minute, that she would catch them like this, but he couldn't stop looking at Jack. "What are you saying?" he asked, not because he couldn't put the pieces together but because he wanted desperately to hear Jack say the words out loud.

"I went to therapy today and I just laid it all out in front of her, and she told me the exact same thing Riley would have told me. I'm so fucking sorry, Robby. I–"

They heard it at the same time, the creak of his front gate. Jack pulled his hand back as if scorched, resting it on his thigh, and Robby looked over to find Heather walking up with a takeout bag in her hand. She looked between them both, clearly surprised to see Jack, but she gave him a smile nonetheless. "Dr. Abbot."

"Oh," Jack said, his dawning realization making Robby's stomach twist up with nausea. "It's just Jack outside of the hospital."

She nodded, setting the takeout on the small porch table and putting her hands in her jacket pockets; she was too polite to ask Jack why he

had clearly been crying, but she looked at Robby briefly nonetheless. “I’m really sorry to interrupt.”

“No, you’re not interrupting,” Jack said, scrambling to his feet and looking down at Robby, who avoided his eyes. “I swung by unexpectedly to pick something up.” He set his barely touched beer down next to the takeout container, hands flexing ineffectively at his sides. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah,” Robby managed to get out, his mouth inexplicably dry. With that, Jack left, heading back down out of the gate, and as soon as he was out of eyesight Heather settled into the chair he’d vacated, reaching out and touching Robby’s hand. “Don’t,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you mind telling me what I just walked up on?” she asked, pulling her hand back to give him space. “You’re so pale, Robby.”

Robby rubbed a hand over his face, looking at her and wondering if she could see how close to tears he was. “I really didn’t want you to see this side of me. This fucking anxiety. I didn’t want to inflict it on you.”

“You’re not inflicting anything on me,” Heather said. “What’s going on?”

Robby swallowed hard, closing his eyes briefly before beginning to explain. He told her everything, from meeting Jack to Riley’s death to his confession the summer before, the night he’d met her. She listened, only interjecting when she had a question to ask, and by the time he was finished Robby felt drained but somehow lighter. It had been so long of people just knowing bits and pieces of his life, no one aside from Jack knowing the entirety of the story and Jack unable to bear the weight of it.

When he was done, Heather leaned back in the chair, her box of takeout half-finished. “Do you think he was about to tell you he loves you?” she asked. Hearing her say the same thing he'd been thinking made Robby suddenly feel light-headed, his dark eyes meeting hers intently. “I mean, it sounds like it to me.”

“You don't sound surprised,” Robby said, studying her, and she shrugged one shoulder, a slight crinkle in the corner of her eyes.

“I knew that night that I approached you that something was wrong, I just didn't know what it was,” she said. “I kind of liked the idea of you

not being serious about me because I figured it wouldn't last forever anyway. I'd either get matched to the Pitt and we'd have to break up or I'd get matched somewhere outside of Pittsburgh and we'd have to break up. I mean… over the last year I've kind of thought about what a future with you would look like, but there was always this wall there that I just couldn't penetrate. I'm not going to fall in love with a man who can't love me back."

"I didn't intend for this to happen," Robby said quietly. "I didn't want to drag you into this, any of this. I really do think you're beautiful, and this last year or so has been so fun. Having you around, spending time with you… I wonder if we'd met ten years ago if we would have had a shot."

"Maybe," she said, looking at him. "But we didn't." She got to her feet, closing the slight distance between them and putting her hands on Robby's head, pulling him against her flat stomach and holding him there for a moment, her fingers cool against his skin. "I think you should go and talk to him," she said finally. "I think you both need it."

Robby sighed, resting his forehead against her stomach and letting his hand linger on the back of her thigh. "You'll find someone, Heather."

"Oh, I know," she said, laughing. "I'm not worried about that." She leaned down to kiss him, sighing softly when she pulled away. "Go talk to him. And I guess we should stop hooking up for real now, huh?"

"Probably for the best," Robby agreed, letting go of her in return. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay? And thanks for bringing dinner."

"You owe me one," she said, heading back down the porch steps, and Robby watched her go through the gate, making sure she reached her car okay before getting up and heading inside.

He grabbed his phone, reading through the texts Jack had sent before opening up the caller and dialing the number he knew by heart. Jack picked up on the second ring, his voice hoarse and yet steady. "What?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm sitting in my car," he said, relief flooding through Robby at the words. "Why?"

"Come back," Robby said, leaning against his kitchen counter. "I'm

serious, Jack. Get back here as soon as you can."

Jack didn't say anything, hanging up without another word, and Robby spent several agonizing minutes in his kitchen, worried that if he called back he would ruin things. He trusted Jack, trusted that he was on his way, and calling him now felt rather like Orpheus with Eurydice, the pair of them poised on a precipice. He was considering getting another beer when he heard the front door open, Jack appearing in the threshold of the kitchen with his car keys still in his hand.

They stared at one another for a long time, Jack's face flushed and his breathing slightly erratic, and then before Robby could say a word Jack spoke. "I love you. I think I loved you before Riley died. I know she loved you, too, and I know she wanted to say it, but we were both so scared, and then… and then I kept thinking about how the two people I'd loved most had died, and how you could die, too. It was easier to just not admit how I felt but keep you around until… This last year has sucked. I've missed you every fucking day. I should have said something but I was so fucking…"

Robby came around the kitchen island and grabbed Jack by the front of the hoodie, dragging him forward. They looked at one another and Robby saw it in his eyes, that same thing that had been chewing him up for years. He yanked Jack closer and kissed him, hard and rough, and it was nothing like kissing Heather, nothing like kissing Janey.

It was just like kissing Jack, and it had been something he'd been dreaming of doing for years.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry for the delay on this! It was a weirdly busy weekend and I wanted to make sure I did it correctly. We're in the homestretch now!

Chapter 10: 2023

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2023

“So, where’s the honeymoon gonna be?”

Robby sighed, glancing at Dana across the counter and wondering what he’d done to deserve being tormented by her every day of his life. He was joking, of course, but he had discovered over the course of the winter that she wasn’t going to let him live down his and Jack’s budding relationship. She’d found out wholly by happenstance, Robby having inadvertently kissed Jack by the lockers one night during shift change, and it had been a source of teasing ever since.

Saying it in front of Frank, though, made Robby feel admittedly a little embarrassed. Frank had looked up from his charts, his blue eyes wide. “Honeymoon? Is that where you’re going? I didn’t know you guys had gotten married.”

“I’m not– I’m not married,” Robby said, shooting Dana a look. “She’s joking. I’m not married to Jack.”

“Okay,” Frank said, in a tone that clearly said Robby had made it weird. “It’s okay if you are.”

“I know it’s okay,” Robby said. “But it’s not true.” He huffed, shaking his head and turning back to Dana. “I should have never told you guys.”

“What, I think it’s cute,” Dana said, grinning. “Besides, it took you two long enough. Riley and I had a bet going. She thought it’d take a year for you guys to get together, I gave it eighteen months.”

“You had a bet with Jack’s wife on when he’d get in a relationship with someone else?” Frank asked, looking stunned, and Robby and Dana exchanged looks; it was impossible to explain the entanglement that had existed even before Riley had passed. “I hope neither of you ever meet Abby.”

“Trust me, kid, we aren’t interested in your wife,” Dana said, reaching out to pinch Frank; he ducked his head, laughing, and headed off to check on his patients. As soon as he was out of earshot, Dana looked up at Robby. “Sorry for giving you a hard time,” she said, patting his arm. “It’s easy to do when you’re taking off on us for a week.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Robby said, taking his glasses off as he heard his name being called by one of the residents. “And to answer your question, we’re going to Jack’s cabin for a couple days. Jake’s coming with us, so not exactly a romantic getaway.”

“Oh, come on, there’s always time for romance,” Dana called as he headed off, Robby huffing a laugh and raising a hand at her over his shoulder.

To be honest, the last eight months had been kind of unbelievable. He and Jack had come out slowly after Dana had caught them, come out to people who already kind of knew or who had suspected, and while Robby had anticipated acceptance to some degree he’d been surprised by the number of people who were downright happy for him. Janey had even cried when he’d told her and had admitted that she’d thought he and Jack would never figure it out.

Things had returned to the way they’d been when right after Adamson had died, he and Jack inseparable, and yet… and yet they hadn’t gotten much further than kissing. Robby kind of felt like a teenager again, testing the waters to see how far he and Jack could go, but every time they reached the cusp of having sex it seemed like something came up. Robby was also hyper-aware that neither of them had ever had sex with another man before, which was definitely adding another layer of complexity.

Thank god the cabin had only one room and Jake was coming. It meant Robby didn’t have to confront this particular emotional entanglement for at least another week or so. It was the start of summer and the ED was busy enough to keep Robby from his thoughts, although his looming vacation promised the free time to really get stuck into everything he was feeling; spending it with two of his favorite people was a good distraction.

He was just gathering his residents for an end-of-shift debrief when he heard Perlah exclaim in delight. “Jake!”

Robby turned to find the teenager grinning at Perlah, the other nurses who were getting ready to leave beginning to gather around Jake the way they always did when he came in. “Hi, hi,” Jake said, putting his hands up amenably. “I can’t stay long. I just wanted to catch Robby before he left.”

Robby broke away from his residents, walking over to Jake to pull the kid into a brief hug, ruffling his curly hair. “What’s up, man? Couldn’t

wait until tomorrow?" Jake looked up at him, putting on an exaggerated grimace, and Robby tilted his head to one side. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm so sorry," Jake said. "I know we're supposed to go fishing tomorrow but one of my friends won a radio contest and we got free tickets to see a concert tomorrow night. There's a hotel room and everything, and–"

"And we can go fishing anytime, but you can only go to this concert once," Robby finished, grinning. "Don't worry about it. We can plan a trip later this summer. I really didn't know people still entered those contests."

"Hey, it paid off for us," Jake said, laughing. "Mom's waiting in the car but I wanted to tell you in person. It didn't seem fair to call it off over a text."

"You're such a good kid," Robby said, giving Jake a little shove between the shoulder blades. "Go on. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Sounds good. Tell Jack I'm sorry he can't show me his lure trick!" Jake lingered for a few minutes longer to chat with Donnie before making his way outside, Robby returning to his residents and finding his mind racing. He wasn't upset that Jake wasn't coming since he was pretty sure he would have made the exact same choice as a teenager, but it had fundamentally changed the vibe of this trip.

Maybe Dana wasn't so far off with her assessment of it as a honeymoon.

"Jack, wake up," Robby said, settling his arm around Jack's shoulders as he backed into the sloped driveway of the cabin. It was nice to be here in summer, the trees bright green and the lake looking like an ocean beyond the stretch of the land. It had been Jack's suggestion that they take a week off, bring Jake up to the cabin, visit Riley and just take some time off together, but without Jake the trip felt like it had taken on a deeper meaning. Robby remembered being in his senior year of high school, of going on a camping trip with his girlfriend's family, of the antsy anticipation of being left alone in a tent together and the fumbling loss of virginity that had followed.

At fifty-one, pulling into the cabin now felt a hell of a lot like how he'd felt at seventeen.

Jack stirred, looking at Robby with those dark eyes of his. “Jesus,” he mumbled, stretching his arms above his head; his shirt rode up, revealing a thin strip of skin. Despite having seen Jack semi-nude hundreds of times, this felt different, heat rushing up over the back of Robby’s neck. “I passed out, huh?”

“You were snoring before we got off our street,” Robby said, parking the car. “Are you gonna be on your night shift schedule the whole time we’re up here?”

“Oh my god, I hope not,” Jack said. “Give me a day or two and I’ll get out of it.” He dropped a hand onto Robby’s nape, pulling him in and kissing him briefly on the mouth. It was so strange, openly loving Jack and finding that it looked very much like his relationship with Jack always had. “Are you disappointed that Jake couldn’t come?”

“A little bit, but it gives us an excuse to take some more time off this summer and bring him up here. Maybe I can use this chance to remember how to fish.”

“Oh, that isn’t an auspicious start,” Jack said, rubbing his thumb over the baby hairs at the back of Robby’s head before finally letting go of him. “Come on, let’s get the place opened up and aired out before we go and pick up groceries.”

Robby had never considered himself particularly domesticated and yet with Jack it had crept up on him so slowly that he couldn’t delineate when it had actually begun. They opened all the windows of the cabin, dragged the bedding out onto the back deck so it could air out in the fresh breeze coming in off the lake, and headed into town to pick up groceries for the next few days along with the briquets needed for the small charcoal barbecue. It was easy to just exist with Jack.

It took a few days to get settled into the routine at the cabin, Robby trying his best to relax and Jack clearly trying to get back onto sleeping through the night and not during the day. By the third day they had it mostly figured it out, and while Jack had proven unable to skip his afternoon nap it didn’t matter much, Robby stretched out in the hammock strung between two trees near the lake and leafing through a non-fiction book he’d been putting off for too long.

He was happy, really. That happiness just happened to come with a certain amount of guilt. How could he be laying here, the sun peeking through the trees, the lake lapping against the shore, when he knew exactly what kind of hell was happening back in Pittsburgh? When he

had trouble closing his eyes some nights because of what he'd seen? Even Adamson, dead now these two years, still reared up out of the darkness at times, sorrow clutching at Robby like a vice and asking him what he had done to deserve the luxury of relaxing when there was so much suffering undergone by others.

He had read the same paragraph several times, ruminating instead on a growing ball of self-loathing in his chest, when the hammock was abruptly swung violently to the left. "Holy shit," Robby said, setting his book down and looking up to find Jack leaning hard on the side of the hammock. "I still don't understand how you're so fucking quiet when you walk."

"Military," Jack said, kissing Robby on the corner of the mouth before awkwardly clambering into the hammock alongside him. They nearly ended up capsizing, the only thing stopping them from flipping over the grip Robby held on one of the straps as Jack balanced himself, but in the end Jack settled comfortably against Robby's chest, yawning like an overtired housecat. "I didn't used to need naps. I could flip between day shift and night shift like it was nothing. We're getting old, Robinavitch."

"Speak for yourself," Robby said, nudging his nose against Jack's temple. "I'm not grey yet."

"Low blow," Jack murmured, huffing out a soft laugh. "You don't like the silver fox thing?"

"I didn't say that, did I?" Robby asked, taking Jack's chin in his right hand and lifting his head gently. He kissed him slowly, exploratory, and Jack kissed him back, one of his hands already sliding down over Robby's thigh. His fingers caught the hem of Robby's khaki shorts and he hauled them up a little bit, fingertips running over the inside of Robby's leg, and as freaked out as Robby thought he might be at starting to take this step he found that as soon as he'd begun to kiss Jack any sort of fear had evaporated.

"Have you just been laying out here thinking about me?" Jack murmured as they broke the kiss, searching Robby's face. He hiked Robby's shorts up even further, almost touching the spot where his thigh met his torso, and when Robby didn't pull away Jack grinned, biting the side of his neck. "Okay, okay. Maybe I'm a little glad Jake didn't come, now."

"Pervert," Robby said, but he hauled Jack a little closer, kissing him

on the apple of his cheek. “I just… Have you…?”

“No,” Jack said. “I mean… not with a man. I’ve thought about it plenty, though. When I was a teenager, I used to jack off to Brad Pitt in *Thelma & Louise*, and–”

“You surprise me literally every single day,” Robby said. “I always pegged you as a Kurt Russell guy.”

“You think you look like Kurt Russell?”

Robby ran his hand over his beard, mock-preening. “I mean, if the shoe fits…”

Jack laughed, gripping Robby by the throat gently and kissing him again as hard as he dared. Robby liked when he did that, liked the way Jack’s mouth was rough and growing more and more familiar as time passed, and he leaned into the kiss once again, not flinching away when Jack’s fingers dragged over bottom of his briefs. He wasn’t sure how long they made out in the hammock except that he once again felt like he was experiencing this all for the first time, the afternoon sun making him slow and lazy and entirely at the mercy of Jack’s hand on his skin.

Jack grew bolder, thumb stroking along the soft underside of Robby’s chin as he kissed him harder all the while. Robby figured they probably could have kissed in the hammock for a couple of hours at least before Jack got too bold, swinging his left leg over on top of Robby in a move that got them both sent tumbling to the ground. “Oops,” Jack said, holding Robby by the front of the shirt and looking down at him without an ounce of actual embarrassment in his eyes. “Maybe this is a sign.”

“A sign that we’re too old to make out in a hammock for half an hour?”

“A sign that we should take it inside,” Jack said, using one of the hammock trees to haul himself to his feet. Robby clambered up after him, catching Jack by the waist and pulling him closer. He wasn’t sure how they managed to get to the cabin at all, the fifty or so feet between the hammock and the back deck a blur of Jack’s mouth and Jack’s hands and Jack’s smell. They’d barely gotten in the creaking screen door before Jack was shoving Robby’s t-shirt up off over his head, breaking the kiss only for a second to do so.

It was as though a floodgate had opened, Robby raising his hands to

hold Jack's face, kiss him harder than he had before, so hard he was worried he was hurting him except Jack kissed back with equal fervor. They stumbled backwards to the bed, Jack hitting it with the back of his knees and allowing himself to fall backward, looking up at Robby and grinning. "Well. It seems we've come to the crux of it."

"Why would you say it like that?" Robby asked, kneeling on the bed between Jack's legs and reaching down to help Jack take his shirt off. He leaned down all the way, kissing him on the forehead. "Listen. I trust you. I think that I'm ready to do whatever it is you want to do." He looked at Jack intently, well aware that he was blushing but unable to do anything about it. "I'm gonna assume that you feel the same."

Jack grinned, digging his fingers into the meat of Robby's ass and dragging him down onto the bed. "Oh, trust me, I do," he said, rolling over on top of Robby and kissing him again as though doing so was all he ever wanted to do.

The sun had begun to set, the lake dyed pink from the sky, and Robby hummed as he flipped the burgers on the small barbecue, content for the first time in a long time. Jack was in the small shower of the cabin, having started the burgers while Robby had cleaned up and left them to him once he'd emerged refreshed and wearing only sweats, and Robby was glad for the moment of peace and quiet. There was a soft breeze and somewhere down the lakeshore he could hear music, tinny and faint but vaguely familiar.

Robby closed his eyes and tilted his head back. "Thank you, Riley," he murmured out loud, and if the wind picked up when he spoke it only served to comfort him.

Chapter End Notes

two chapters left :(however you guys know i'm about to go crazy on thursday when i see handsome with an edge attending physician doctor jack abbot meow

if you're enjoying this fic, i have a 90s rabbot au on the go which will be longer! i literally haven't written a multi-chapter fanfic in probably close to 15 years prior to this one, so fruitcake was really just me testing the waters after a couple of longer oneshots. there's... 6....? 5? chapters of the other one right now with updates every thursday.

Chapter 11: 2024

Chapter Notes

I am SO SORRY for how late this is! I put the date wrong on my calendar :'(please forgive me.

2024

Robby forced his way into the stall furthest from the men's room door, barely cognizant of whether or not there was anyone else in there with him before he hit the ground, anxiety ripping through him in waves. His chest felt as though it was being torn open, his heart beating so fast he could feel the pulse of it in his throat, and he covered his mouth to smother a sob. The panic attack had come over him so suddenly that he had barely managed to excuse himself from Trauma 1 in time, the front of his gown still covered in blood.

It had been getting worse and worse lately, panic tearing through him at the drop of a hat, and Robby had recognized the triggers early on. Being masked brought back the pandemic somewhat, although he was usually able to overcome that. Ventilators, the ECMO, intubation, all seemed to set it off worse than he could understand. Untimely death, too, weighed on his shoulders so heavily that he thought he might be crushed beneath it.

There was currently a little girl laying in Trauma 1, dead after being hit by a car, and despite all the work Robby had done to keep her alive there was no bringing her back. He had lost so many patients, death unavoidable at every turn, and since Adamson, since Riley, anxiety had been building up inside him like a pressure cooker. He was usually able to choke it down, however, especially at work.

Today it had hit him like a tidal wave. He clutched at his necklace, the sharp edges of the star biting into his palm, and squeezed his eyes closed. How long he was in there, he wasn't sure, but he finally managed to get his breathing under control, getting shakily to his feet. He had just splashed some cold water on his face, trying his damnedest to get himself calm, when the bathroom door opened and Donnie came in. He took one look at Robby and it was immediately obvious he was concerned, his brow furrowing. "You okay?"

"Stomachache," Robby lied. "Really came out of nowhere."

Donnie didn't look convinced but walked towards the urinal regardless, patting Robby on the shoulder as he passed him. "Dana was looking for you. The parents of that girl are in the viewing room." He paused, letting his hand linger briefly. "I'm really sorry, man."

“Part of the job,” Robby said, giving him a smile that felt more like a grimace. He headed out into the main part of the ER, pausing only briefly to get some hand sanitizer and meeting Dana’s eyes across the room. She raised her eyebrows and he nodded, gritting his teeth and heading towards the viewing room. Maybe it was a blessing that he and Dana had gotten so good at communicating without words, a byproduct of the pandemic where so much had to be conveyed by eyes, but today it didn’t feel like one.

He pushed into the viewing room after using the brief walk across the ER to ground himself, knowing full well that this was part of the job, that he had told hundreds of people the same news before. Lately, though, this whole thing was weighing on him so heavily he thought he might suffocate. The parents of his dead girl were waiting for him, the mother sitting in one of the chairs with her head down, the father pacing the floor. Robby knew that the moment they saw him they understood what had happened, both of them going stark white and quiet.

Robby made sure the door was closed entirely behind him, putting his hands in his pockets to avoid twisting them together out of anxiety. “I’m sorry,” he began, and as soon as the words left his mouth the mother let out a sob, covering her face. “We tried our best, but all indications point to your daughter having died before she ever got to the hospital. Resuscitation was impossible.” He swallowed hard, feeling his panic rising in his chest again, sour and suffocating. “Our social worker Kiara will be down in a few minutes to discuss the resources available to you, and we’ll make sure that you have as much time as you need with your daughter.”

“Are you sure she’s dead?” the father asked, the first thing out of his mouth since they’d first come to the department earlier, following the ambulance. “This has to be some kind of joke.”

“It’s not,” Robby said gently. “I’m sorry. I know that that’s not enough, but I am. We did everything we could to bring her back.”

“But you didn’t,” the man said, and Robby could see that he was getting angry, a desperation building in his voice that Robby had seen a thousand times. It was a common enough response, the inability to accept that their loved one had died, and Robby knew that it was easy enough to blame the doctor rather than the circumstances themselves. Still, it stung. “Isn’t it your job to save people? You can’t even save a little girl. One little girl!”

Robby took a deep breath through his nose to keep himself calm, trying to focus instead on all the people he had saved in the past; instead, every person he'd failed appeared in front of his eyes. Adamson had told him a dozen times that he couldn't control everything, that all he could do was his best, and yet right now it didn't feel like that. If he'd worked harder, if he'd cared more, if he'd bloodied his fingers to the bone… "I know that this is the worst news you'll probably ever get," he said slowly, searching for the words. "I know that there's nothing I can say that will change how terrible this day is for you, or the days that are coming. The hospital can offer support but inevitably the most important thing for you is to lean on each other."

"Lean on each other?" the father began, but before he could continue his wife had reached out, taking his hand gently and stilling him with just the touch. Robby looked at her and she nodded almost imperceptibly, Robby nodding back before leaving the viewing room and taking a few seconds in the hallway to compartmentalize before heading towards the nurse's station.

"Kiara's on her way down," Dana called. "We moved her out of Trauma 1 but there's another on the way. Crush injury."

"Got it," Robby said, using the chance he had to make his rounds, checking on his residents one by one before returning back to Trauma as the crush injury arrived. It was hard to believe a little girl had just died in this same space but Robby had no time to dwell on it, another emergency superseding the one before, the worst day of someone else's life just another drop in Robby's overflowing bucket.

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Robby rested his head against Jack's chest as he stretched out on the couch, the other man leafing through the literature Robby had brought home in silence. Jack instinctively moved his arm to put it around Robby's neck and chest, rubbing an idle circle on Robby's ribcage as he read. "Okay," he said finally, setting the papers down on the coffee table. "I think it's a good idea."

"Do you actually, or are you just humoring me?" Robby asked, closing his eyes and pressing a soft kiss to Jack's arm, comfortable in a way he barely ever allowed himself to be. "You can tell me no, you know."

"I don't want to tell you no," Jack said. "I think updating our wills is the smart thing to do." He sunk his head down to rest his chin on

Robby's head, pressing his cheek against his dark hair. "Right now if one of us died there'd be nothing the other one could do. You're not on my mortgage, I'm not on yours. And if we didn't die but if something else happened…"

"I know," Robby said, opening his eyes and staring across their living room, anxiety swelling up again. "What happens when we get old, Jack?" Jack was quiet for a minute and Robby finally tilted his head back to look at him. "What?"

"I just… I don't know," Jack said slowly. "After Riley died, I kind of stopped thinking about the future like that. I just assumed that I would just…"

"Die," Robby finished, knowing the feeling all too well. "I used to have this feeling when I was a resident, this blankness that would open up in front of me and just stretch on for eons. I used to think I wouldn't reach thirty, then when I reached thirty I moved it to forty. Now I just wonder how I'm making it day to day." He raised his right hand, taking Jack's hand on his ribs and squeezing it gently. "Sometimes I think I should head into private practice."

"I don't think you could handle it," Jack said, and Robby huffed. "Not in a bad way," Jack clarified, hauling Robby backwards so he was almost completely in his lap. "I just think you and I aren't built like that anymore. I know I'm not." He was quiet for a moment, kissing the crown of Robby's head almost absentmindedly. "You'd tell me, right?"

"Tell you what?" Robby asked, closing his eyes again. He had never thought he'd be the sort of person who could be held like this; even though he was larger than Jack, the other man was accustomed to being the bigger spoon, and he had proven himself quite adoring of any physical touch he could get.

"If you wanted to die."

Robby was quiet, listening to Jack's heartbeat and the soft sound of his breathing, and thought about it. It wasn't even that he wanted to die, not actively. He just thought sometimes, almost without realizing, that it would be so much nicer if things just stopped. If he took a left turn instead of a right on the way home, if he drove his car into the Ohio, if the water washed up around his windows… the idea of that sort of nothingness was tempting.

"I don't know," he finally said, realizing he'd taken way too much time to answer. "Not… I know if I'd tell you or not. But I don't know

if I want to die or if I just want to stop living sometimes. It seems easier."

"I get it," Jack said softly. The idea of Jack understanding was a strange balm, a sense that he wasn't stewing in his loneliness, and Robby slid one of his hands down over Jack's knee, squeezing it gently. "I do. When Riley died, there was literally only one thing keeping me going." Robby cracked one eye open and Jack grinned. "Obviously."

"I just wonder sometimes what the point is. I try so hard to save lives and I can't decide if there's a net positive to what I do. There's so much blood on my hands." Robby sighed, rolling onto his side so his head was on the arm of the couch, the rest of his body laying across Jack's lap. "Why can I save eighty year old monsters whose families hate their guts but not little kids who've never done anything?"

It was Jack's turn to be quiet, idly stroking Robby's hair, and when he spoke again it was softer than Robby have ever heard him. "Do you know I had a near death experience once?"

"Was it when you lost your leg?"

"No, it actually wasn't," Jack said. "I was a teenager, and my buddy had just gotten his license. We were ripping around on these backroads in his dad's truck and this deer ran out into the road. He swerved and we went down the embankment, flipped a few times. Even before we stopped, I knew I was going to die. I cracked my head right against the window." He took Robby's hand and put it against the back of his skull, guiding his fingers over a raised scar. "I don't even know what happened. I was upside down in the passenger seat, and I could hear my buddy yelling, could hear him just screaming my name, but all I felt was this weird sense of peace."

He paused, lacing his fingers with Robby's and leaning further into his hand. "It was almost like swimming. Like going so far out into a lake that all you can really see anymore is the sky when you lay on your back. But as I got deeper into it this fear overcame me. I had barely kissed a girl, never even tried to kiss a guy, and I was dying upside down in a pickup truck. There was this moment where I realized that it was happening, and I just… I knew that I had more stuff to do. That if I died there right then, it'd mean a lot of suffering down the line."

Robby rolled back over, looking up at him, and pulled Jack's head down towards himself. "Come on," he said. "Don't tell me you had

some psychic vision of yourself in the army or as a doctor."

"No, I'm not telling you that at all," Jack said, stealing a kiss. "But I *am* telling you that I got this crazy feeling that it wasn't my time. I passed out before my buddy could get me out of the car, and when the paramedics showed up I was dead. They got me back quickly and it kind of set me on the path to medicine. Probably explains my adrenaline addiction, too."

"That might be the TBI from smashing your head through a car window," Robby murmured. "But what does this have to do with me?"

"Narcissist," Jack teased. "Listen. You feel like you've hit the end of your rope, right? But that's not fucking true. There's a lot left for you to do. A lot of people relying on you. How many people did you save yesterday at work?"

Robby looked up at him, brow furrowed. "I don't know."

"How many people died?"

"Two," Robby said.

"You need to start counting the ones you saved. I know it's hard because they go upstairs or they get discharged and you never see them again, but you need to see every empty bed in that department as someone whose life is better because you were there on the day you needed them most. And you need to see me as someone whose life is better because you're in it."

"You're feeling sappy tonight," Robby said, mostly because while Jack was comfortable with expressing himself so freely Robby hadn't gotten the hang of it yet. He slid his fingers over the back of Jack's head again, weirdly comforted by the scar. "I don't think I ever had anything that bad happen to me. I did stand up too fast once underneath one of the playground structures in elementary school and crack my head open right on the top. Didn't leave a scar, though."

"That is one of the most pathetic things I've ever heard," Jack said. "You really never got up to no good?"

"Mm, not really," Robby said, stretching out again but keeping his head solidly in Jack's lap. "My grandmother was strict. I mean, she tried her best, and I don't think she was really sure what to do with an idiot teenager running around, but she really had me on lockdown. The worst I ever did was bum a few cigarettes after school and try to

skateboard once, but I just skinned my knees."

"How the fuck did you end up willing your entire life to a one-legged combat veteran, Mother Teresa?"

"God knows," Robby said, making a face. "You sure you're okay with it?"

"It's probably a conversation we should have had already," Jack said. "And it's a good time to have it. I've been thinking about selling the house. I fucking hate being a landlord." He settled against the back of the couch, yawning. "And I was going to see if you wanted to sell this place, too."

"Okay, so we sell both our homes, combine our assets, and… do what?"

"Buy a place together," Jack said. "Our place. Not the place where me and Riley lived, or the place where you and Janey lived, but the place where we live. I don't know about you, but I don't plan on having another relationship after this. That's part of the reason why I'd like to know if you're about to up and die on me."

"So romantic," Robby said, knowing damn well that he was nearly asleep despite the serious nature of their conversation. "I don't want you to think I'm ready to die. I'm just… tired."

"I know," Jack said. "Just promise me that if it gets to the point where you're more than tired, you tell me. We've been through everything together. Might as well go through some more."

Chapter 12: 2025

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2025

“Were you really going to do it?”

Everyone else had left, the park outside the hospital as quiet as it ever got. Donnie had promised to get Samira to the bus stop safely, Mateo had walked Javadi to meet her dad, the others had filtered away until it was just Robby and Jack left, finishing the last two beers and settled alongside one another on the same bench. In the absence of their coworkers, they had naturally gravitated into each other’s space the way they always did once alone, Robby resting an arm over the back of the bench, Jack’s knee pressed against his.

Robby could not get the image of Jake’s face out of his head, could not swallow down the words Langdon had flung at him in the ambulance bay. He could not compartmentalize this time, could not erase the boy he loved like a son or the man he’d hoped would someday take his place just as he had taken Adamson’s. He had trained plenty of residents in the preceding years, but most of them were simply there as a stop along the journey. Even Heather had confided in him that she didn’t want to remain in Pittsburgh, that her calling was not to run the Pitt, but Langdon had been different.

And Robby had missed every sign. The entire day had been a parade of misery, from the second he woke up and remembered it was Adamson’s death anniversary to now, sitting on a bench with the man he loved, unable to even begin to pretend that if Jack hadn’t arrived on the roof when he had Robby would be so much gore on the sidewalk below. “I’m sorry,” he said by way of admitting the truth, allowing his right hand to rest on the back of Jack’s neck, fingers smoothing over his skin. “I don’t… do you ever get the sensation that you’re finally in a position you like, where you feel stable, and then you find yourself crashing back down into this version of you composed only of the worst parts?”

“Do you think the man you were today is the worst Michael Robinavitch that exists?”

Robby looked over at him, finding Jack’s dark, intense eyes staring back at him and looking away again quickly under the scrutiny. “Do you not?”

“No,” Jack said simply. “I think that you were put under an inhuman

amount of stress, more than any one person should have to bear, and you held that shit on your shoulders like nothing I've seen outside of active combat. Is Jake upset with you? Sure, but the kid has just been through something that will be with him for the rest of his life. Langdon, too… he doesn't know it yet, but you've saved his life and you've preserved his career if he works at it. You saved more people than you lost today, Robby."

"I saved strangers," Robby said quietly. "I always seem capable of saving strangers. But if you put someone I love in front of me… I can't save them. I can never fucking save them."

"You saved me," Jack said, so softly that Robby almost didn't hear him. "Just because you didn't do it in the emergency department doesn't mean that it didn't happen. I know Riley told you how I was when I came back from war. When she died… actually, no. When she was diagnosed, when her cancer came back, I was sure that I was going to die the same day that she did. I told myself that I would stay by her side until she died and then I would take my service revolver and I would…"

He swallowed, twisting his ring around on his left hand before leaning forward so he could look Robby in the eyes, catching his gaze again. "*You* saved me," he said in that earnest tone he got, the one that made Robby uncertain about what he could say in return, unable to access that part of himself anymore. "Listen to me. Even when you weren't in love with me, you loved me. I've never had a friend like you, a brother like you. You loved me, and you loved Riley, and you took that love and you enlisted Adamson and Dana and even Janey and Jake and you turned that love towards me and Riley and you stopped her last months from being these lonely, desperate things and you stopped my last months from being my *last months*."

"You two deserved it," Robby said, searching Jack's face, wishing he was capable of cracking himself open and exposing his insides the way that Jack did. "I loved Riley, you're right. I would have done anything for her and for you, even before it was a romantic love. Even before I knew you would reciprocate." He paused, setting his now empty beer on the bench beside him with the other cans they needed to dispose of. "I don't feel like I deserve it, Jack."

"But you do," Jack said. "Even if you can't see it, I can see it, and if I have to drag you back off the ledge every time, I'll do it. I'll tell you I love you every fucking day, I'll come up on that roof and pull you back, I'll hammer it into your thick skull until you believe me." He

reached out, grabbing Robby by the nape of the neck and shaking him slightly. “I know I can’t love this out of you, Robby. I know I can’t pull you out of those depths. But I’ll make sure that when you get your feet up underneath yourself I’ll be there to reassure you that you deserve every ounce of happiness you can scrape up and the hospital can’t take that out of you.”

Robby looked at him, allowed Jack to pull him closer and kiss him on the mouth. He settled his hand on Jack’s thigh, pulling back just enough to press another small kiss to his cheekbone. “Put your leg on,” he said, smacking Jack’s thigh lightly. “We should head home. I don’t know about you, but now that the adrenaline’s worn off I just want to get to bed and sleep.”

“I love you,” Jack said, as blunt as could be, and Robby looked at him. “You don’t have to say it back, but I’m going to say it to you until I think it’s sunk in.”

“You know I love you, too,” Robby said, getting to his feet and collecting the beer cans before helping Jack get to his feet, the pair of them heading out of the park and towards home, hands linked.

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Robby awoke shortly after two in the morning in a cold sweat, sheets tangled around his feet where he’d kicked them off and dark hair plastered to the back of his neck. He had been in the Pitt, walking the strangely empty halls, and when he’d passed Pedes he saw that the door was half open. He stepped inside, hand on the door, and when it opened he saw that the room was nearly as long as a football field, gurney after gurney of blood-stained sheets covering hundreds of bodies. Robby walked as if in a trance towards the closest bed and as soon as he reached it the body beneath the sheet sat up, the fabric pooling around its waist, Leah looking at him with cold dead eyes.

Robby looked down the length of Pedes and the beds were all filled with patients looking at him, one after another. The six victims of the mass shooting, bloody and full of holes; Amber, still wet from the pool that had drowned her; Nick Bradley, whose eyes were open for the first time in Robby’s recollection. They stretched on and on, every bed containing someone he had failed to save, and as Robby walked through Pedes and saw patients he hadn’t thought about in years – the exhausted young father who’d accidentally suffocated his sleeping infant, a patient whose AIDS-induced pneumonia had seen his heart give out during a round of antibiotics – he realized that every body in

that makeshift morgue had been with him only on the worst, the last, day of their life.

He saw Adamson sitting there before he even reached that row of beds and that had been what woke him up, the knowledge that his greatest personal failure was also to the detriment of every patient that had come after. They had been left with Robby, the shadow of Adamson, who possessed half his skills, his heart, his compassion. A hollow man performing medicine, who had seen a dozen people die today and could not think of the hundred he had saved. Adamson's dark eyes, glazed over in death, had been so filled with disappointment that it had jolted Robby right out of the nightmare and into the darkness of his bedroom.

Robby could hear Jack breathing beside him, soft and steady. On a normal night he would have lay there for a few moments longer and listened to the other man. He usually took solace in the rare nights they could spend together, but after the nightmare all he could think of was Jack in one of those beds, of the day coming where he could not save yet another person he loved. He swallowed hard and got out of bed, padding across the room and slipping out into the hallway. In university he would have stolen a cigarette from his roommate and smoked out on their precarious balcony. A decade ago he'd have moved downstairs to sleep on the couch. Tonight he went into his small office and closed the door, settling down at his desk and resting his head on the cool wood, his computer thrumming softly where it sat.

He didn't do much charting anymore, and with the promotion into Adamson's role he'd set aside a good bit of the student paperwork that used to keep him busy as well. The desk was mostly for show, but sometimes it reminded him of where he'd come from, that he had once loved medicine so much that he wrapped his life around it, the home he'd built with Jack in the last year retaining small pieces of the lives that had once been separate. The living room held the couch where he, Jack, and Riley had watched countless hours of trashy TV. The guest room held the bed that had once been Jake's. The towels in the upstairs bathroom were ones Riley had bought after she'd begun chemotherapy again, one spotted with bleach after Robby had spilled some while helping her clean.

Robby smoothed his hand over the top of the desk, staring at his fingers and feeling the empty spot in his chest grow larger, replacing lungs, heart, stomach. He knew what was wrong with him, but to name it was to admit defeat, to allow himself to be weak. He didn't

know how Jack did it. But Jack had been through war, and all Robby had been through was the normal chaos of an emergency department.

He swallowed hard and sat up in the chair, the sweat on his forehead and neck having evaporated and leaving him chilly even in this early September night. Robby had just risen from the desk when the door to the office swung open, Jack leaning against the jamb with his forearm crutch that he used when he didn't feel like putting his leg back on. "The funny thing about being a light sleeper is that as soon as the bed is empty, you wake up," he said, voice sleep-hoarse. "I got worried."

"I won't kill myself with you in the house," Robby said, trying to joke, but it came out flatter than he meant it to and Jack gave him that quick, sharp look that told Robby he was toeing the line. "I'm sorry. That came out stupid."

"Why're you in here?" Jack asked, looking around. "Thinking of switching back to just teaching?"

"It's tempting," Robby said, coming around the desk. He hesitated, wondering if he should tell Jack about the nightmare, but decided not to. Dreams were just manifestations of thought, the brain trying to make sense of things, and the stress of the day had undoubtedly primed him to dream a little differently than he usually did. "I got hot in the bedroom."

"Oh yeah?" Jack asked, and before Robby could knock his hand away he'd reached out, tweaking one of Robby's nipples through the thin fabric of his white t-shirt. "Tell that to your nipples, Madonna."

"You are such a pig," Robby said, but he leaned in and kissed Jack regardless, giving him a soft shove on the shoulder. "Come on. I won't wander off again. Let's go back to bed."

Curled back up with Jack's arm around his waist, it was easy for Robby to sink back into that pre-sleep contentment, the warmth of the other man helping to temper that emptiness in his chest a little more. Jack's face was against the back of his neck, his breathing soft and fluttering against his skin, and Robby almost thought he'd already fallen asleep again when Jack spoke slowly. "Why did you actually get up?"

In the dark, facing away from Jack, unable to see the way the other man was looking at him, it was easier to tell Jack what had happened. Robby curled himself a little smaller and recounted the dream, from the stark white emptiness of the ED to the sprawling morgue that had

once been Pedes, and Jack listened from start to finish, even when Robby's voice got a little weepy at the end.

Once he was done, Jack tightened his grip on Robby's waist and kissed the back of his neck. Robby had never allowed himself to feel this small, this vulnerable, and he lay there for a few moments in the silence of the room, breathing deep through his nose and trying to stop himself from crying the way he had earlier in Pedes. Jack was the one to break the silence, his voice soft and low in the dark room, his breath warm against Robby's skin. "I'm always going to come for you," he said slowly. "I'm never going to let you jump, Robby. No matter how bad it gets, I'm not going to turn away from you."

Robby was quiet again, sliding his hand over Jack's around his waist, linking their fingers together and opening his eyes in the dark. "Tonight… I think if you'd been five minutes later, I'd have gotten up the nerve."

"I know," Jack murmured softly. "That's why I woke up when you left the bed. I thought you'd steeled your resolve."

"I'm trying," Robby said. "I don't want to leave you now that I've got you. I really am trying." He swallowed hard, his chest twisting up again in that blind panic that had stricken him earlier, unable to shake the nightmare, the deaths that he felt were on his hands. "Fuck, Jack."

Jack didn't say anything and Robby wondered if maybe he'd fallen asleep again until Jack pulled his arms away, rolling over on the bed and clicking on his bedside light. They'd painstakingly bought furniture together, decorated the house the way they wanted, and sometimes Robby wondered if Jack would be left alone in yet another home he had built with yet another person he loved. For a moment he was sure Jack was going to leave the room despite his insistence that he would stay by his side, only to be proven wrong when Jack reached over to haul Robby into a sitting position.

They sat facing each other on the bed, so close that they were nearly in each other's laps, and Jack placed both calloused hands on either side of Robby's neck, pressing his thumbs against his cheekbones and looking him straight in the dark eyes. "Why did you go into medicine?"

"What?"

"Tell me the reason. I don't care what it is. Just tell me."

“I wanted to make sure that I went into a career my grandmother would be proud of,” Robby murmured. “I didn’t want to work in a factory like my father had. I wanted to prove to her that by raising me she’d made someone who could do more with his life.”

“Did your grandmother know how many people you had saved before she died?”

“I don’t know,” Robby said. “But she was… she was proud of me. I know that much. I don’t think she’d be proud of me now.”

“Why?”

“Because I…” Robby trailed off, picturing his grandmother’s face, her steadfast belief in him after the death of his parents. He rarely thought of her these days, the grief of her death still poignant but the moments he recalled it growing further apart, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d thought of how she would see his career now. She had died long before he’d been made Chief of Medicine, long before he’d even become an attending. She had no idea who he was now, and he wondered if that was part of the reason why he was struggling so badly with failure hanging over his head. “I worry every day that I’m doing the wrong thing. I worry that I did the wrong thing today, that I could have saved more people or done more if I was a better leader or teacher. If I hadn’t sent Heather home, or if I’d noticed Langdon earlier, or…”

“Those things aren’t on your shoulders, at least not alone.” Jack pulled him forward, kissing him on the forehead, the bridge of the nose. “The best thing you can do right now is sleep. And instead of dreaming about the bodies you think are on your hands, dream about me or your grandmother or Riley or anyone who loves you. I’ll stay awake for a bit and if you start having a nightmare again, I’ll pull you out of it.”

As Robby took the advice, settled back down into the bed, nestled back into Jack’s arms, he wondered how he had gone almost fifty-five years of his life before feeling this sort of love. He had never been so seen and it was a strange thing to recognize, although perhaps the vulnerability of the day had forced him to recognize that the state of his emotions wasn’t something he could handle on his own. To know that he had a partner like Jack… He gripped the other man’s arm where it lay around his waist and fell into a fitful but dreamless sleep.

When he awoke in the morning, it was to sunlight streaming in the

bedroom window and the faint smell of bacon. In the stark light of day the night before seemed somehow more bearable, the horror of what happened at Pittfest still heavy but no longer crushing. Robby stretched out on the bed, staring up at the ceiling as he slowly came awake. The bed was still warm where Jack had been, but he knew that the other man had just gone downstairs to make breakfast, the two of them in desperate need of a quiet day off.

An idea had been forming overnight, something that had first sparked inside him the day before when Jack had talked him off the roof. Robby rolled onto his side and forced himself to get out of bed, a physical ache having settled in his bones after the high adrenaline of the day before. He showered, brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and felt some semblance of humanity return.

When he got downstairs, Jack was in the kitchen, leaning on his forearm crutch and watching as bacon crisped in a frying pan. “I’m making omelets,” he said, leaning his head back as Robby approached and kissing him square on the mouth. “You want mushrooms?”

“Of course,” Robby said, but he didn’t pull away to sit down at the counter. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Jack’s waist, splaying a hand flat against his stomach and resting his chin on the crux of his neck. “Thank you for last night. I know I don’t say it enough. If you hadn’t been there…”

“But I’ll always be there,” Jack said. “And if you have another terrible shift, and if this gets worse, and if I have to drag you kicking and screaming into therapy… I’ll still be there at the end of it all.”

Robby was quiet for a few long moments, his heart beginning to race as he steeled himself. “I need to ask you something,” he said slowly. “I don’t want you to freak out.”

Jack rested his cheek against the side of Robby’s head, kissing him on the temple again softly. “I think I know what you’re going to ask, but I want to hear you say it.”

“How could you possibly know?”

“Ask me and we’ll find out.”

Robby tightened his grip, closing his eyes before saying something he had never felt the urge to say before. “I think we should get married.”

Jack laughed, a sudden barking sound, and raised his left arm to grab

Robby by the back of the head, kissing him again hard on the mouth. When he pulled back, he grinned at Robby, his dark eyes glinting. “I knew it.”

“No way you did.”

“I did,” Jack said. “Because I had the same thought yesterday when I got to the ED and saw you. I knew what I was walking into and that we were about to go through hell and yet I just kept thinking that there wasn’t anyone else I would go through hell with.” He ran his fingers through Robby’s dark hair, looking at him intently. “I know we’re already entwined a lot more than most couples. The wills, the house, even the car. But I’d like to marry you.”

Robby raised his hand to take Jack’s, running his finger gently over the wedding ring the other man still wore. “I didn’t want to ask you but after yesterday… I could lose you in a second, and I would hate to die knowing that I didn’t tell you how much you mean to me.”

“You’ve never had to tell me,” Jack said, and he removed the bacon pan from the stove before turning around to look up at Robby fully. “Riley knew you loved me, and I think she knew that I’d grow to love you, too. I think she’d be really fucking pissed at me if I looked you in the eyes and said I wouldn’t marry you.” He held his hand up, flexing his fingers. “Looks to me like I’ve got plenty of room alongside that other ring. Certainly enough for another gold band.”

Robby furrowed his brow, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes as he looked down at Jack, his heart thrumming hard in his chest. “I need you to know that I would have come to this conclusion at some point even without yesterday.”

“I know.”

“And I need you to know that I’ve never even fathomed loving someone like this. Especially not you. Not when I first met you.”

Jack grinned. “Jesus Christ, that was a long time ago, huh?”

“I didn’t like you at all.”

“I thought you were a sanctimonious prick.” Jack laughed, putting his hands on either side of Robby’s face and kissing him on the mouth again, this time a little deeper. He looked Robby in the eyes, searching his face before seeming pleased with what he saw there. “Listen to me. We’ve got a hell of a lot of time to make up for. You’re not gonna cut

it short by jumping off a roof.”

Robby had spent so much of his time in the last decade feeling guilty. Guilty about his feelings for Jack, about what he saw as a betrayal of Robby, about the work he did and the blood on his hands. Standing in their sunny kitchen in the aftermath of one of the worst days of his life, looking down at a man he knew he loved, that guilt was not absolved but it was set aside and maybe for the moment that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

> and it's done :'(i really hope people enjoyed this! this was my first foray into multi-chapter fanfiction in, like... probably 13 years? so definitely a little out of my wheelhouse. thank you to everyone who commented along the way -- your support is HUGE and really kept me going even if i suck at responding. maybe someday i'll break free from this new pitt obsession but for the time being... i'm sure i'll be posting more stuff, and there's a 90s rabbot fic on my profile if you're jonesing for more multi-chapter stuff.
>
> (also for purposes of this fic i'm pretending i haven't seen season 2 and what poor shape robby is in)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!